

# *Art of War Papers*

## **Initiative Within the Philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*: Determining Factors of the Understanding of Initiative in the German Army, 1806-1955**



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Gen. von Kluck and staff, ca. Autumn 1914. Cover art is courtesy of the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog, Bain Collection, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ggbain.18672>.

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## Abstract

Initiative Within the Philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*, Determining Factors of the Understanding of Initiative in the German Army, 1806-1955, by LTC Martin Sonnenberger, 78 pages.

The philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* is aimed at initiative of subordinates within and outside of the scope provided by the commander's intent. While acting within the intent, in general, does not cause problems, acting in alteration of or opposite to given orders regularly will. Deviating from orders within the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* is justified by the *grundlegende Lageänderung* – fundamental change of situation, or if acting upon a higher responsibility to the unit.

In four, partly-overlapping phases, this thesis examines the factors determining the use of initiative while applying *Auftragstaktik* in the German military forces from 1806 until today.

1. The emergence of *Auftragstaktik*, from Clausewitz's understanding of war to the total initiative of field commanders in Moltke's age and World War I, 1806-1918.

2. Low tactical level initiative in the synchronized warfare of World War I, 1915-1918.

3. An army shaped for initiative versus detailed tactical control by Hitler, 1919-1945.

4. The ethical component of initiative – responsibility for the preservation of units to *Innere Führung*, 1941-1955.

Using doctrinal references and analysis of actions of commanders in the different wars, the thesis examines the influence of technological developments, culture, societal factors and political influences, as well as developments in warfare.



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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

On October 12-13 [1806], the French *bataillon carré* swung to the left. With Lannes in lead, it contacted the Prussians over the Saale at Jena. By the morning of October 14, Napoleon had concentrated the better part of two full corps in a small bridgehead over the Saale, seized on Lannes's initiative the night before. With Napoleon looking on, Lannes led off the attack in the morning against the Prussian right. Two divisions advanced abreast (Gazan on the left and Suchet on the right) and drove a wedge into Prussian positions. Augereau soon joined in to the left of Lannes. Ney arrived on the battlefield and, on his own initiative, wedged himself in between his fellow Marshals without orders. He impetuously made for some tense moments as his leading units outstripped the two flanking corps, but his neighbors soon fought their way up to his relief.

Things weren't going well for the Prussians, but as the infantry of Major General von Grawert's division arrived, it seemed as if Hohenlohe might yet save something of his day. In one of those moments seemingly invented to demonstrate the changeover from one military era to another, however, they deployed far too slowly for the attack. "Solemnly, as if on the parade ground," they halted and formed line within range of the French skirmishers in front of the village of Vierzehnheiligen.

– Robert Citino, *The German Way of War*<sup>1</sup>

### Background

For modern warfare, the military revolution caused by the establishment of the citizen-soldier motivated by nationalism following the French Revolution liberated commanders from the restrictions under which they operated in the age of Cabinet Wars.<sup>2</sup> The growth of armies to unprecedented sizes prohibited the exercise of centralized command and control from a single figure – the *Feldherrnhügel* epitomized by Frederick the Great of Prussia.<sup>3</sup> Larger and more complex armies led to dispersing units into autonomous elements to avoid overstraining the available road infrastructure and permit logistical supply by foraging, thus imposing the need for decentralized execution.<sup>4</sup> In Prussia, the "crushing defeat"<sup>5</sup> at Jena and Auerstädt broke up the gerontocracy of state and army and permitted a fundamental transformation of the army by reformers led by Gerhard von Scharnhorst and August von Gneisenau. Army reform gave birth to both the development of a highly

qualified corps of staff officers and the idea of a professional ethos aiming at “aptitude and eagerness for independent action”<sup>6</sup> – namely, initiative.

The concept of initiative played a key role in developing the concept of *Auftragstaktik* in the Prussian and German armies.<sup>7</sup> The quick and decisive defeats of Austria in 1866 and France in 1870 led other armies to adopt it as well. *Auftragstaktik* originated from an acceptance of the idea of decentralized execution based upon the mindset that commanders and soldiers who cannot be directly controlled have to act independently within their superior’s intent. The doctrinal concept was then further refined throughout the 19th Century; the term itself can be found from 1906 on.<sup>8</sup> With the adoption of Doctrine 2015, the US Army explicitly introduced the philosophy of Mission Command, a derivative of *Auftragstaktik* intended to facilitate the development of leaders who “exercise disciplined initiative [to] create opportunity by taking action to develop the situation.”<sup>9</sup>

This work analyzes the historical understanding of tactical and operational initiative against the background of the current doctrinal framework of *Auftragstaktik* as defined by the *Bundeswehr*. As far as US doctrinal terms equate to the definition and understanding in the *Bundeswehr* concept of *Auftragstaktik*, they are used for ease of understanding. However, those terms must be understood within the overall concept of *Auftragstaktik*, not simply compared against the US Mission Command philosophy.

The aim of this work is to identify factors that historically have influenced or determined the acceptable limits of initiative during the application of *Auftragstaktik* in the Prussian and German armies over the last two centuries. Such a study serves discussions about the future use of *Auftragstaktik* and Mission Command, and will facilitate a clearer understanding by readers between acceptable deviation from guidance in pursuit of the higher commander’s intent, and destructive disobedience.

The philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* aims at fostering the initiative of subordinates within and outside the scope provided by the higher commander’s intent. In general, acting within that intent as authorized by trust and mutual understanding does not cause problems. However, acting in opposition to stated orders or changing them without good reason damages trust and inhibits common understanding. Deviating from orders is within the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* justified by the

*grundlegende Lageänderung* – a fundamental change in the situation, or if acting upon a higher responsibility.

Different historical examples suggest that one can assess the validity of deviating from orders only after the fact, based on the resulting tactical success or failure. If *Auftragstaktik* in the *Bundeswehr* enables and demands initiative, parameters must be put in place to qualify the acceptable degree of initiative *before the fact* rather than afterwards.

### **Frame of Reference**

From the earliest depictions of humans using what had been hunting tools as weapons to fight each other in battles, men have sought to gain advantages through improved weapons (technology) and specific forms or techniques of application – what later became doctrine.<sup>10</sup> What Geoffrey Parker describes as the five principles of the “Western way of war” perpetuated and increased the struggle for advantages through technological developments and the doctrinal role of the individual as a part of a larger military body.<sup>11</sup>

In *On Flexibility*, Israeli scholar Meir Finkel argues that attempts properly to identify future threats caused by a potential adversary’s efforts to gain a technological or doctrinal advantage prior to the outbreak of a conflict routinely fail.<sup>12</sup> Thus, he suggests that a solution to countering technological and doctrinal surprise lies in the ability to react flexibly to the initial surprise.<sup>13</sup> While his model aims at explaining how to develop a capability of change, in this context it serves the purpose of providing a logical background to the concept of initiative.

The model describes four flexibility strata:

1. Conceptual and doctrinal flexibility, an atmosphere that encourages lower-ranking commanders to challenge concepts and doctrine,
2. Organizational and technological flexibility, diversity and redundancy as well as technological versatility and changeability,
3. Flexibility in command and cognitive skills, consisting of mental flexibility and flexible command, and
4. Fast learning, including a rapid circulation of lessons.<sup>14</sup>

While the first two strata describe the development of an army before a conflict and the last one is aimed at learning either during or after a

conflict, the third stratum describes the reaction to surprise caused by technological or doctrinal change during a conflict.

The stratum of cognitive skill and command and control flexibility thus describes the effect that different armies seek to achieve when planning meets the reality of warfare. Consequently, it constitutes an answer to the challenges Carl von Clausewitz described as resulting from the difficulties in gaining proper intelligence. Although outside of Finkel's focus, it lends itself to an understanding of how to mitigate the effects of surprise from friction and chance.<sup>15</sup>

National derivations of *Auftragstaktik* or Mission Command as they are used by different armies result from distinct historical developments and habitual as well as deliberate adaptations of the idea that decentralized execution of operations best answers the above-mentioned challenges to military commanders. This work uses the Prusso-German concept of *Auftragstaktik*, the conceptual ancestor of the doctrine used today by many armies, as the comparative model for historical analysis.

## **Initiative**

Finkel describes two elements in his third stratum: "Command flexibility [which] grants the commander the freedom to make on-the-spot decisions"<sup>16</sup> and cognitive flexibility, referring to the trait of a military commander "to respond quickly to battlefield contingencies by improvising solutions that result in rapid recovery."<sup>17</sup> While cognitive flexibility is a function of the selection and education of officers, in the context of this study, command flexibility is defined by *Auftragstaktik* doctrine and its contemporary interpretations.

Defining the term "initiative" sets up some challenges. German doctrine literally refers to initiative in the context of the US Army's definition of operational initiative.<sup>18</sup> Other terms used in this context are freedom in the way subordinate commanders execute their missions and/or deviate from published orders. In the absence of a German doctrinal definition, initiative within Finkel's above-mentioned framework for purposes of this work will be understood as the actions resulting from the combination of both cognitive and command flexibility. This basic definition for initiative will be categorized and related to the other terms, as reflected in the German Army philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*, in the following section.

The basic definition also corresponds to the US Army's definition of "individual initiative—[t]he willingness to act in the absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen

opportunities or threats arise”<sup>19</sup> and the description of “disciplined initiative, . . . action in absence of orders, when existing orders no longer fit the situation, or when unforeseen opportunities or threats arise”<sup>20</sup> as used in US Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command*.

### Categories of Initiative

As indicated above, initiative in *Bundeswehr* doctrine is not explicitly defined, nor are the cases and circumstances in which it is to be executed narrowly prescribed. This condition results from its generally more descriptive character compared to US Army doctrine. A full comprehension of the character of *Auftragstaktik* can thus only be achieved by the study of doctrine combined with experience gained through military training and education. This section categorizes three different forms of initiative contained in the concept of *Auftragstaktik*. The three forms are determined by the conditions set for their execution; the degree of freedom in relation to the higher commander’s directive as represented by his intent; and the mission given to the subordinate.<sup>21</sup>

At its most basic level, initiative is the commander’s leeway to execute a mission on his own terms. Based on the higher commander’s intent, which depicts how the operation is to unfold in terms of a scheme of maneuver and which objectives are to be achieved, subordinate commanders analyze their mission and identify their essential contribution to the superior’s operation. Within this framework, *Auftragstaktik* grants subordinate commanders wide leeway over methods of execution, though the degree of freedom of action depends on the type of mission.

Constituting a general rule (and a core element of *Auftragstaktik*), there are no preset conditions in the execution of this form of initiative, but it also remains constrained within the boundaries of the unit’s mission. Compared to the US system of mission command, similarities are visible. In practice, German orders tend to be limited to the bare minimum of tasks and one purpose per unit. The US system of assigning tasks, which each include detailed directives and a purpose, is much more prescriptive and restrictive.<sup>22</sup>

The second category of initiative is derived from the acknowledgement that the situation in a battle can change to such an extent that the changes may render a higher commander’s plan obsolete. The doctrinal requirement for this is a fundamental change in the situation, which occurs when the conditions or assumptions on which the mission was

based no longer exist. The concept of fundamental change in the situation also includes the necessity for rapid action and the inability to obtain or wait for the superior commander's decision. If it becomes necessary to deviate from the mission, the higher commander's intent remains the basis for subordinate commander's decisions. Deviations from the mission have to be reported as soon as possible, and the acting commander will be held responsible accordingly.

While conducting an assessment of the situation during an operation, commanders have to determine whether a fundamental change in the situation has occurred; in other words, would the commander have given the same mission had he known how the situation would develop?

This form of initiative is bound to both the fundamental change in the situation and the inability to communicate with the higher commander based on either a time-critical reaction or the loss of communication. Nevertheless, it remains constrained by the higher commander's intent. While the US Army acknowledges that commanders deviate from orders when those orders no longer fit the situation (a concept similar to the German fundamental change in situation), the search for and action upon exceptional information is no longer defined in ADRP 6-0.<sup>23</sup>

The third form of initiative is based on a deeper insight into and an understanding of the respective unit's situation. As we will see in the historical studies, this can consist of an extraordinary opportunity presenting itself, one outside the boldest imagination of the superior when he was formulating his intent. The other scenario is when a military action will only result in additional losses, which are out of proportion to the contribution to the success of the higher commander's operation or which would result in the breakdown of a unit's ability to fight as an organized body.

This latter possibility is not codified in doctrine but represents a logical extension of the concept of fundamental change in situation, as described above. As such it is bound to the professional understanding of an unfolding battle and the chances, risks, and limitations resulting from deviating from the higher commander's intent. As with the second form of initiative, the situation has to require time-critical reaction and timely prior communication with the higher commander must be impossible. US Army doctrine does not encompass this form of initiative. However, the application of mission command in the absence of a clear



concept is described in a sufficiently abstract manner to potentially allow for this third category of deviation from orders.

| Category | Degree of Freedom                | Conditions                      |
|----------|----------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1        | Within Unit's Mission            | None                            |
| 2        | Within Higher Commander's Intent | Fundamental Change in Situation |
| 3        | Within Professional Assessment   | Not Specified                   |

Table 1. Overview of the Three Forms of Initiative. *Source:* Created by author.

Additionally, no German soldier is legally or morally obligated to follow orders that represent a misdemeanor; indeed, German soldiers are obligated to disobey orders resulting in a criminal offense.<sup>24</sup> As those are legal rules, acting under such legal circumstances is not considered to be initiative-based in the above-stated definition, and therefore this subject area is not discussed in this work.

**Phasing Model**

This thesis covers close to 200 years of philosophical evolution in the Prussian and German Armies. Changes to doctrine or in the officer corps' collective understanding of *Auftragstaktik* in the four different armies of this time period did not always go hand-in-hand with the major political events; personalities and the conduct of warfare exercised greater influence. This suggests using a phased model to identify major developments in the field of initiative.

1. The emergence of *Auftragstaktik*, from Clausewitz's understanding of war to the total initiative of field commanders in Moltke's age and World War I, 1806-1918;
2. Low tactical level initiative in the synchronized warfare of World War I, 1915-1918;
3. An army shaped for initiative versus detailed tactical control by Hitler, 1919-1945; and
4. The ethical component of initiative–responsibility for the preservation of units to *Innere Führung*, 1941-1955.

As described above, initiative is a means to counter surprise or the unexpected. While the first form of initiative is supposed to constitute the normal interaction between different levels within the army, the latter two forms for the sake of coordination are bound to specific exceptional circumstances. Doctrine is aimed at informing the processes of planning and conducting operations in conditions that are either

known or can reasonably be anticipated. Countering exceptional and unexpected circumstances naturally cannot be described to a full extent. Hence, analyzing doctrine alone will not suffice to meet the goal of this work. The analysis of the different phases will therefore also be based upon the manner of execution of operations, doctrinal documents, and publications of influential leaders, as well as the external framework of the armed forces in each of the four periods.

## Notes

1. Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War, From the Thirty Years' War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 116-117.
2. MacGregor Knox, "Mass Politics and Nationalism as Military Revolution: The French Revolution and After," in *The Dynamics of Military Revolution 1300-2050*, ed. MacGregor Knox and Murray Williamson (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 58-66.
3. Knox, "Mass Politics and Nationalism as Military Revolution," 60. The size of the armies Frederick the Great commanded for a single battle did not extend the approximately 60,000 men of the battle of Hohenfriedeberg in 1745. The average number of forces was between 20,000 (Mollwitz and Rossbach) and 37,000 (Zorndorf). See Citino, *The German Way of War*, 37-91.
4. Peter Paret, "Napoleon and the Revolution in War," in *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age*, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 125.
5. Knox, "Mass Politics and Nationalism as Military Revolution," 69.
6. Knox, "Mass Politics and Nationalism as Military Revolution," 72.
7. From the German perspective, the armed forces in the different epochs and with the different political systems are seen as distinct. Therefore the term German armies between 1806 and 1955 incorporates the (imperial) German Army, the *Reichswehr*, the Army within the *Wehrmacht*, and (post World War II) the Heer within the *Bundeswehr*. The National People's Army of eastern Germany was founded in 1956 and is not part of the analysis within this thesis.
8. Hugo Friedrich Philipp Johann Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906 Kriegsgeschichtlich Erläutert* (Berlin: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1906), 6.
9. US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, September 2012), 1-1.
10. The detailed discussion of the development of early warfare from group hunting methods and its tools to ancient armies with designated technology is far beyond the possibilities of this work. For a comprehensive portrait of the use of horses as an example for the technological struggle for advantages in warfare, back to 3200-3100 BC, see Louis A. DiMarco, *War Horse, A History of the Military Horse and Rider* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Publishing, 2008).
11. The five principle foundations of the western way of war are reliance on superior technology, discipline, aim for decisive victory, ability to change but also to conserve military practices, and the power to finance those changes. Geoffrey Parker, ed., *Cambridge Illustrated History, Warfare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-6.
12. Meir Finkel, *On Flexibility, Recovery from Technological and Doctrinal Surprise on the Battlefield* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 2.
13. Finkel, *On Flexibility*, 2.
14. Finkel, *On Flexibility*, 2-4.
15. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 117, 119-120.
16. Finkel, *On Flexibility*, 99.
17. Finkel, *On Flexibility*, 98.

18. US Department of the Army ADRP 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols*, defines operational initiative as “[t]he setting or dictating the terms of action throughout an operation.”

19. US Department of the Army, ADRP 1-02, *Terms and Military Symbols*, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, November 2012): 1-20.

20. US Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, 2-4.

21. For a comprehensive analysis of the concept of *Auftragstaktik* see Jochen Wittmann, *Auftragstaktik – Just a Command Technique or the Core Pillar of Mastering the Military Operational Art?* (Berlin, Germany: Carola Hartmann Miles-Verlag, 2012). Wittman in chapter 2.3.2 also describes three different “cases” describing the leeway of subordinate commanders, his model however lacks precision and detail, the reference to assigned and implied tasks does not reflect the concept of *Auftragstaktik* which is focused on the higher commander’s intent, the mission and the essential contribution or mission essential task to the higher commander’s concept of operations.

22. US Department of the Army, ADRP 6-0, 2-22.

23. While US Department of the Army, ADRP 6-0, 2-19 only states that “Commanders deviate from orders only when they are unlawful, risk the lives of Soldiers, or when orders no longer fit the situation,” the term exceptional information is not used. The concept of exceptional information as defined in FM 6-0 requires the staff and subordinate commanders to search for exceptional information, “information that would have answered one of the commander’s critical information requirements if the requirement for it had been foreseen and stated as a commander’s critical information requirement.” US Department of the Army, Field Manual 6-0, *Mission Command* (Washington, DC, Government Printing Office, September 2011), A-29. This concept aims at countering the same occasions as the fundamental change in situation concept, however it is in US doctrine not linked to initiative.

24. Soldatengesetz in der Fassung der Bekanntmachung vom 30. Mai 2005 (BGBl. I S. 1482), das durch Artikel 6 des Gesetzes vom 11. Juni 2013 (BGBl. I S. 1514) geändert worden ist: § 11.

## Chapter 2

### The Emergence of *Auftragstaktik*, from Clausewitz's Understanding of War to the Total Initiative of Field Commanders in Moltke's Age and World War I

In general, one does well to order no more than is absolutely necessary and to avoid planning beyond the situations one can foresee. These change very rapidly in war. Seldom will orders that anticipate far in advance and in detail succeed completely to execution. . .

The higher the authority, the shorter and more general will the orders be. The next lower command adds what further precision appears necessary. The detail of execution is left to the verbal order, to the command. Each thereby retains freedom of action and decision within his authority.<sup>1</sup>

— Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke,  
*Instructions for Large Unit Commanders* (1869)

The spirit of the Prussian and later German officer corps in the 19th Century finds no better explanation than in the words of the greatest proponent of that spirit: von Moltke. His influence was so pervasive that the last decades of that century are known as “the age of Moltke.”

The culture that Moltke personified was the direct result of the reform process born of the near-extinction of Prussia following Napoleon's victory at Jena and Auerstädt. The change process in the Prussian Army included the creation of the General Staff, the introduction of higher education for officers, and changes in force structure, equipment, accession and retention of manpower, and many other aspects.<sup>2</sup> The potential for change and the constraints placed on reform reflected the internal struggle between members of conservative and reactionary groups on one side and the reformers, most notably Gneisenau, Scharnhorst, and Hermann von Boyen, on the other.

Overshadowing the internal struggle in the armed forces was the conflict between King Frederick William IV and the democratic movement over constitutional rights and the form of government. The Prussian Army, viewed with suspicion by democrats since 1806, became a focus of the dispute during and after 1848 when its role as an instrument for the preservation of royal power became evident. This role inhibited the ability of the Prussian Army to professionalize until the German-Danish War of 1864 led to a general reconsideration of its role

as an instrument of foreign policy. The war had a calming effect on the monarchy's opponents in the parliament, the effect for which chancellor Otto von Bismarck had hoped.<sup>3</sup> Against the backdrop of these epic conflicts, the doctrinal development of the army appears little more than a sideshow. In fact, it had an impact on Germany, Europe, and the world equal to the other two developments.

Initially, it was not Carl von Clausewitz, who held a purely administrative position at the *Kriegsakademie*, but Scharnhorst and Gneisenau who visualized and then created the General Staff. With this instrument they then promulgated the "technique of command, characterized by clear and comprehensive formulation of objective but always leaving room for individual initiative and freedom of action."<sup>4</sup> Clausewitz's book *On War* formulated and preserved the underlying ideas and hence influenced the generation of officers who commanded in the wars from 1866 and 1870 onwards.<sup>5</sup> *On War* provides the theoretical framework for a Prussian understanding of warfare that started and shaped the process of doctrinal development. Its core concepts, including the battle of wills, friction, and insufficient knowledge about the situation and the resulting chaotic nature of the battlefield, planted the seeds for the idea of the creation of an army which more closely resembles a school of fish than a piece of well-engineered machinery.

Helmuth von Moltke was himself a product of the change processes that shaped the command culture of the Army he took over in 1857. Commissioned into the Prussian Army in 1822, he attended the *Kriegsakademie* and served, as was typical for a General Staff officer, in a broad variety of positions, including military advisor to the army of the Ottoman Empire and high-level positions at the royal court.<sup>6</sup>

Moltke's writings, most notably the 1869 *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders* and the 1888 *Drill Regulations*, which covered units up to the brigade, codified the Clausewitzian school of thought and influenced Prusso-German doctrine well beyond World War I. Hence they constitute a physical manifestation of the change process started with the reforms after 1806; it is from them that we derive the doctrinal concept of *Auftragstaktik*.

The reform process of the Prussian Army was shaped by Scharnhorst and later Gneisenau. In addition to the operational level need to move separately and concentrate at the decisive point, the increased firepower of both infantry and artillery required the breakup of the *Normaltaktik*, the classic linear form of employment of forces in closed

formations. The process of doctrinal adaption at the tactical level, however, went less smoothly. The Chief of the Historical Department of the Great General Staff, Hugo Friedrich Philipp Johann von Freytag-Loringhoven, in 1906 complained about parade-addiction and retro-tactical developments during the long peacetime of the first half of the nineteenth century and even after the Austro-Prussian and Franco-Prussian wars.<sup>7</sup>

The developments shown above are reflected in the structure and content of doctrine as it evolved after 1806. The 1812 *Drill Regulations* for the infantry, the capstone doctrine document developed largely by General Ludwig Yorck von Wartenburg, remained focused on battle-field employment of forces, drill style, from single soldier to brigade level.<sup>8</sup> It did not differentiate between parade and battle drill, but introduced to the Prussian Army novelties such as skirmishers, new assault formations using infantry columns, and stressed combined arms with cavalry and artillery in a supporting role for the infantry.<sup>9</sup> The chapter about skirmish tactics included recommendations about the need for low-level initiative and actions upon one's own judgment of the situation.<sup>10</sup> The manual states: "The soldier is in most cases on his own, no mechanistic formation guides his movement. An outstanding marksmanship, physical agility, judgment, ruse, boldness at the right place, and self-confidence have to be his qualities."<sup>11</sup>

Despite a near doubling in size, the 1847 regulations represented a regression compared to its predecessor. It offered no innovations, confining its discussions to the employment of forces to prescriptive and mechanistic forms.<sup>12</sup> The chapter about skirmish tactics remained unchanged until 1867.<sup>13</sup> True evolution occurred only in 1876; the updates, based on the experiences of the Franco-Prussian War, renewed the emphasis on flexibility in maneuvers based on the increased firepower of both artillery and infantry.<sup>14</sup> As a result of the more decentralized arrayal of forces, the independence of officers, non-commissioned officers, and soldiers in skirmish lines is stressed.<sup>15</sup>

All leaders of skirmishers must constantly observe the enemy and the terrain features, in order to determine how the skirmish line or a part of it can best advance towards the enemy, if and how an encirclement or a flanking attack can be executed, or a weakness of the enemy can be exploited.<sup>16</sup>

At the tactical level, the need to supplement the command word by an order was accepted, to allow for clarity about the purpose of a tactical action.<sup>17</sup>

The 1888 drill regulations distinguished for the first time between battle drill and parade drill. In another departure from the past, this version also devoted considerable space to discussions of fundamental realities of warfare and leadership in combat. They reflected Clausewitzian thinking as well as Moltke's instructions for large unit commanders (as quoted at the beginning of this chapter) and extended these instructions to leaders at the lowest level, declaring autonomy to be fundamental to success in warfare.<sup>18</sup> Drill provides discipline, morale, and the basic skills necessary for the employment of units according to the situation and necessities of the battle. Instead of being an end in itself, as in prior doctrine, drill was envisioned as a means for realistic – *kriegsgemäße* – exercises.<sup>19</sup> Junior officers must position themselves and be willing to exercise initiative to exploit opportunities, while non-commissioned officers bore the responsibility for the employment of the soldiers of their squad.<sup>20</sup> Battalion, regimental, and brigade commanders assigned missions to their subordinates but left the method of accomplishment to them while ensuring their understanding of the cohesive concept of the battle plan.<sup>21</sup> The 1888 manual describes a prototype of the fundamentals of mission type orders stating:

[The battalion commander] executes the battle through missions he assigns to his companies. Only on the occasion of obvious misunderstandings or mistakes that could draw the battle in an unintended direction, the direct override in the platoons of single companies is due. . . His actions have to be aimed at retaining the common scheme of the companies. The companies for their part aim upon accomplishment of their missions also to the common scheme.<sup>22</sup>

The foreword of the 1888 regulation, signed by Emperor William II, underscores the importance of independence of thought and action by military leaders at all levels. It states the need not to restrict the leeway deliberately provided by the regulations, threatening offenders with enforced retirement. More specifically, the need to foster battlefield initiative is underlined by the king's admonition that a breach of the rules of the regulation's drill and parade elements should be punished. In contrast, the "mistaken understanding of part two [battle tactics] is to be corrected in an educating manner."<sup>23</sup> The 1888 regulations formally



establish the philosophy of *Auftragstaktik* as a general rule for command and control at the tactical level.

The 1906 drill regulations continued the trend towards individualization of the soldier on the battlefield and independent action of smaller units. The company became the largest element of employment in drill.<sup>24</sup> In addition to the autonomy of soldiers and leaders at all levels praised in the earlier doctrine, non-commissioned officers were now expected to assume the role of their superior officers if the situation demands.<sup>25</sup> This version of the regulation explained *Auftragstaktik*, in a form comparable to that presented at the outset of this paper, in this way:

Orders (*Anordnungen*) given from rearward commands will easily be made obsolete by the events. **Timely action** is often only possible upon **independent decision**. Subordinate commanders must recognize at the same time that they are required to solve the tactical problem (*Gefechtsaufgabe*) **as intended by the higher commander** [emphasis in the original].<sup>26</sup>

In selecting historical examples to support the principles of the 1906 regulations, the Chief of the Historic Section of the Prussian General Staff, Hugo Friedrich Philipp Johann von Freytag-Loringhoven, focused mainly on the employment of forces under the circumstances of the technological developments of the late nineteenth century weapons and the new battle tactics. *Auftragstaktik* is described in a manner that makes it clear it was an established philosophy. The need for proper orders, which reflect the intent and coordinate the movements of cooperating units, is emphasized, as well as the need for precise reporting and proper communications.<sup>27</sup>

The high demands put upon leaders as a result of tactical and technical developments in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, reflected in the above definition, leads seamlessly into a discussion of the concept of initiative. The 1906 regulation explained:

The foremost quality of a leader remains the **willingness to take responsibility** (*Verantwortungsfreudigkeit*). An officer would demonstrate faulty understanding of this concept, if one aimed at making arbitrary decisions without regard for his role in larger operations or by not precisely following given orders and letting a “know-it-all” manner take the place of obedience.

But in cases in which the subordinate has to say to himself that the originator of an order lacks the ability properly to direct

execution, or where the order has been rendered obsolete by the events, it becomes an obligation of the subordinate not to obey or to alter the execution of orders received and report this to the superior. The full responsibility for not obeying the [original] order remains with him. . .

All leaders have to constantly stay aware and inculcate in their subordinates the knowledge that **forbearance and dereliction weigh more heavily than mistakes in the selection of an action** [emphasis in the original].<sup>28</sup>

According to this edition, the independence of subordinate leaders is to be less clearly defined; the risk of mistaking caprice for initiative is pointed out even while on the other hand autonomy is seen as a prerequisite for success in battle.<sup>29</sup> In a similar vein, the 1906 version for the Bavarian Army authorized by Prince Regent Luitpold includes a foreword that stresses the need for realistic battle drills and more leeway at lower echelons in the conduct of this training.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the larger discussion of *Auftragstaktik*, Freytag-Loringhoven apparently did not consider initiative to be important enough to clarify it with historical examples. The necessity of a balance between independent action and synchronized operations is mentioned, but as a whole seems to have been less important than the new tactics countering the technological developments.

## **Operational Level Doctrine**

The first doctrine for the conduct of operational level warfare was created by the 1869 *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders*. Reprinted in 1885 and 1910 with minor changes, the manual covered the echelons from division up to the field army, and its principles shaped the German Army's understanding of the command of large units well into the 1930s.<sup>31</sup> Drafted by junior General Staff officers, the writing process was closely monitored and the draft was in parts intensively edited by Moltke before it was submitted to the king.<sup>32</sup> Examples of intensive editing are present in Chapter I – “General Remarks” – and Chapter VI – “Command and Control,” which point out the necessity for higher level commanders to concentrate on their function and not to interfere with their subordinates' responsibilities by managing details, as the quote at the beginning of this chapter illustrates.<sup>33</sup> While this aimed at creating command flexibility, Chapter I stresses Clausewitz's friction when it states that officers will often face situations where, in the absence of orders, they have to act upon their own understanding

of their superior's intent, hence using cognitive flexibility. The manual describes the tension between initiative of commanders and the necessity for unified control over large units. While commanders at every level are obliged to restore the communications with their superior during periods of disruption, the manual points out that

[t]here are many situations in which the officer must act according to his own judgment. It would be absurd if he waited for orders in moments where often no orders could be given. As a rule, however, his work is the most profitable for the whole when he carries out the will of his superior.<sup>34</sup>

The second chapter of the 1910 edition, "Leadership," places responsibility for the unified effort of multiple field armies to the army commanders themselves. They are obliged to act within the intent of the supreme commander (*oberste Feldherr*). The manual postulates that only subordinates who permanently consider this framework can help overcoming the inherent difficulties of the control of mass armies. Initiative is explained by means of a reference to the importance of tactical victories in relation to the general mission. For commanders of smaller units the "old rule of marching towards the sound of the guns"<sup>35</sup> remains the perpetual guidance, while higher-level commanders must analyze the potential consequences of their decisions on the overall aim – outflanking, envelopment, and annihilation of the enemy.<sup>36</sup>

Overall, the doctrine written and influenced by Moltke sets the tone for the Prusso-German command philosophy of *Auftragstaktik*. It gave official sanction to the understanding of warfare as expressed by Clausewitz's *On War*. It also offered solutions to the challenges resulting from the vastly growing geographic extension of the armies and the need to disperse those forces to avoid casualties based on the increased firepower of advanced weapons. His *Instructions for Large Unit Commanders* and the 1888 drill regulations formally expressed the mature understanding that both senior and junior officers have to act within the higher commander's intent upon their judgment. Two different developments can be seen: first, the recognition of the requirement to empower leaders at the operational level with sufficient latitude to cope with the increased size of the army and the geographical expansion of the battlefield; and second, the evolution away from autonomously acting soldiers in skirmish lines to independence of action for leaders at all levels to allow for initiative.

## Execution of Initiative

Prussians and Germans participated in several conflicts between 1806 and World War I. The larger ones were the defeats of Napoleon following the battles of Leipzig in 1813 and Waterloo in 1815, the Austro-Prussian War in 1866, the Franco-Prussian War in 1870-1871, and World War I.<sup>37</sup> The two campaigns against Napoleon were fought as part of a larger multinational coalition and took place at a time when the Prussian reforms were only partly in effect. Therefore, this section will analyze only the Danish War, the Austro-Prussian War, the Franco-Prussian War and those parts of World War I which included and maintained the capability for operational maneuver. In a first step, historic case studies selected as exemplary by the Prussian General Staff for publication in Volume 4 of Moltke's *Militärische Werke* will be reviewed.<sup>38</sup> After analyzing this official picture of *Auftragstaktik*, a subsequent inquiry will look other facets of the execution of initiative, which are not part of the official picture.

### The Official Picture of *Auftragstaktik*

As an historical example to illustrate the findings of Moltke's essay *Zusammensetzung der Hauptquartiere-Wahl des Feldherrn-Freiheit des Handelns* (*Composition of Headquarters, Selection of the Commander, Freedom of Action*), the General Staff selected the decisions of General Karl Friedrich von Steinmetz, commander of the Prusso-German First Army during the border battles of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870.<sup>39</sup> Tasked to envelop and strike in the flank and rear of French forces fixed by Second Army, he was ordered on 3 August 1870 to cross the Saar River and concentrate at the right of Second Army. He was directed as follows:

Dilatory advance of the French justifies assumption that the Second Army can be concentrated on the 6th instant in front of the forest zone at Kaiserslautern. If rapid advance of enemy cannot be prevented, concentration of Second Army to take place behind the Lauter. Combined action of both armies in the battle intended; First Army from St. Wendel and Baumholder. His Majesty orders that First Army concentrates on the 4th against Tholey. Tomorrow Third Army crosses frontier at Weissenburg. General offensive intended.<sup>40</sup>

Instead of conducting this enveloping movement, Steinmetz moved directly against the French at Spicheren, thus blocking the advance routes reserved for the Second Army and separating its main body from the

advance elements.<sup>41</sup> Although this caused a logistical nightmare and ruined the plans for a *Kesselschlacht* – the “holy grail” of contemporary European military science – just inside the French border, Moltke’s analysis of actual events takes pains to explain that the royal command’s (hence Moltke’s) shift from general directives to explicit orders was required by the necessity of the combined advance of the armies that could only be coordinated by the king. The case study points out that such direct orders were only justified by the need to coordinate the movements of multiple armies, but that the freedom of execution of the orders by the army commanders was not to be limited.<sup>42</sup> No judgment about the often-criticized Steinmetz can be found in Moltke’s critique, although the various occasions of explaining the concept of operations are stressed.<sup>43</sup> In the days following Steinmetz’s independent action, Moltke ensured that the directions and roads assigned to the different armies would be ordered and changed only by royal command.<sup>44</sup> The tendency to use whichever unoccupied road in sight, disregarding the traffic control measures in the process, seems to have been general behavior by commanders at all levels.

Describing the events surrounding the battle of Columbey-Nouilly (also known as Borny-Colombey) on 14 August 1870, the case study explains again the need to coordinate the operations of the First and Second Army. General Steinmetz’s now much more passive and cautious conduct of operations is described in a very balanced way. Steinmetz’s attempt to preserve his independence by hiding the position of his headquarters is the only point of obvious criticism.<sup>45</sup> The intensive interaction between Second Army and the royal headquarters during and following the battle of Mars-la-Tour and Vionville in contrast is depicted as exemplary.<sup>46</sup> It included direct tactical control of the different corps engaged in the battle – “[b]ecause of the gravity of the situation had become clear, his majesty the king decided to proceed to the battlefield with his entire staff early on August 17.”<sup>47</sup> For the following pursuit the case study states: “All German armies received only general directives. The broad freedom of action, which previously could be granted only to the Third Army and which had to be more or less curtailed in the cases of the First and Second armies after 11 August, was restored.”<sup>48</sup>

The pursuit of the French toward Sedan and the conduct of operations in the following months are described more superficially as interplay between independent operations and “[d]irect orders from the royal headquarters [that] restricted the freedom of decision of the

commanders only when the king's views were not carried out, or when reports of enemy activities made direct intervention unavoidable."<sup>49</sup> There seems to have been no further friction between the royal headquarters and the subordinate commanders worth mentioning to explain nature of the command relationship.

To illustrate Moltke's essay on battle – *Die Schlacht* – several historical examples were selected to exemplify his findings about the independence of leaders. The first case study briefly describes the advance of the Prussian I Corps under Prince Friedrich Karl during the 1864 campaign against Denmark. On 2 February the corps had the mission to secure the eight-kilometer wide chokepoint between the Eckernförde inlet and the Schlei River in the disputed duchy of Schleswig.<sup>50</sup> The advance was part of a flanking or enveloping movement against the Danish forces defending the main fortifications between the Schlei River and the North Sea. The crossing of the river would take place at either the fortified town of Missunde or further east at the village of Arnis.<sup>51</sup> The corps had already reached the chokepoint by 0900 and Prince Friedrich Karl decided to advance toward Missunde to avoid having to secure the chokepoint against threats from two directions and based on an assumption that Danish forces might withdraw when confronted with an energetic surprise thrust.<sup>52</sup> This would have allowed for an envelopment of the forces defending further west. The published analysis reads as follows: "[T]he undertaking against Missunde on that day failed; the crossing at Arnis was not accomplished until 6 February. Nevertheless, the decision arrived at independently demonstrates a correct appreciation of conditions and the enterprising spirit of the commanding general."<sup>53</sup> The extent of appreciation in this assessment (as of all historic case studies published by the General Staff) can only be identified with deep knowledge about the circumstances and discussions of the General Staff in those days. The example above affirms an appreciation for use of initiative by a corps commander engaging his next day's objective prematurely, even though it resulted in a minor defeat and nearly 200 casualties. In fact, Moltke himself had written essays in December 1862, December 1863, and January 1864 which concluded that the river crossing at Missunde would be very difficult. In hindsight he later stated the crossing was impossible.<sup>54</sup> Appreciating the initiative and independent action within the higher commander's intent but against Moltke's professional opinion increases the weight of this assessment and demonstrates the value the General Staff saw in it.

The second case study attached to the battle essay is the account of the unfolding battle of Königgrätz. On the evening of the 2 July 1866, patrols of the Prussian First Army had identified the positions of what they thought was a major portion of the Austrian Army at Königgrätz and the neighboring heights. The commander of First Army decided to maneuver his divisions into attack positions early the next morning, informing Second Army about the situation and his plan and asking for support by available units. The messenger to Second Army was dispatched at 2130 and shortly afterwards the commander's aide-de-camp was sent to the royal headquarters where the king and Moltke were awakened and informed. Moltke assessed that they had the whole Austrian Army in front of them and that First Army, attacking alone, would not be successful. It was decided that First Army was to frontally fix the Austrians and that Second Army would attack the enemy's right flank.<sup>55</sup> The king's aide-de-camp left the royal headquarters for First Army conveying that decision to its I Corps while passing its command post on the way.<sup>56</sup> He reached First Army headquarters at 0400.<sup>57</sup> Although the letter informing I Corps included permission to assemble the forces and individually advance before arrival of orders by his direct superior, I Corps' commanding general, Albert Ferdinand von Bonin, decided to wait for these orders. As a result, the vanguard of First Army did not begin moving until 0930.<sup>58</sup> In contrast to this hesitant behavior, the commander of 1st Guards Division, General Constantin von Alvensleben, was described as exercising initiative – marching to the sound of the guns without waiting for orders.<sup>59</sup> He is described as a role model, along with the division commanders belonging to the VI Corps.<sup>60</sup> The differences are obvious; while von Alvensleben was able to bring relief during the first crisis of the battle, when around noon the Prussian units fighting in the Swiepwald were on the verge of defeat, I Corps' vanguard arrived just in time to contain the frantic attack of the Austrian reserve corps. By his actions von Alvensleben kept the withdrawal road to Königgrätz open.<sup>61</sup> The hours lost by the hesitancy of von Bonin show the benefits of the fundamental rule to march to the sounds of the guns. Von Alvensleben's conduct was effectively turned into state-approved command doctrine when William I conferred upon him Prussia's highest decoration for bravery and valor, the *Ordre Pour le Mérite*.

The third historical example covers the battles on the frontier at the beginning of the Franco-Prussian War. The illustration concentrates on the decisions and operations of commanders at the corps and division level, leading towards the bloody battles and victories of Wörth and



Spicheren. Two different principles of Prussian operational art are depicted as forming the motivation for the different commanders to exercise initiative while being exposed to an unclear enemy situation is attributed to two different principles of Prussian operational art: the aim to make or stay in contact with the adversary, and to concentrate forces for the battle – marching to the sound of the guns.<sup>62</sup> The case study explains the reasons different commanders acted the way they did. It shows how opportunities were used, for example at the Saar River crossing, when an attack on the hills at Spicheren was necessary to extend that bridgehead to an appropriate depth.<sup>63</sup> These actions are contrasted with the negative example of the behavior of the enemy commanders, a contrast Citino describes as “French passivity and . . . inexorable Prussian flanking maneuvers, which simply stretched the French line until it broke.”<sup>64</sup> It is seemingly the stark contrast between the sometimes unimaginative approaches of the tactical level commanders, resulting in high casualties – at Spicheren, for example, the Prussians lost two men for every French casualty compared to a rate of four Austrians killed or wounded per Prussian casualty at Königgrätz – against Moltke’s praised operational level maneuver which created the background for the selection of this case study.<sup>65</sup> The case study also fails to mention Moltke’s own criticism about the battles stated shortly after the war in his *Overview about the Events from July 15th to August 17th 1870*.<sup>66</sup>

This analysis of historical examples is far from complete in covering the publications written, selected or edited by Moltke or in his name by the military historical section of the General Staff. Still, one dominant theme is obvious: initiative based upon independent decisions of commanders was depicted as an important value in itself, even with disregard to the outcome of the action, as shown by the examples of Steinmetz and Prince Friedrich Karl. The aim of such historical examples illustrating Moltke’s essays was to foster initiative within the ranks without fear of judgments made in hindsight.

The final piece of official history to be analyzed in this context is the historic explanation of the 1906 drill manual by the Chief of the Historical Section, Freytag-Loringhoven. It provides historical examples for the different topics comprising Part Two of the manual, the battle.<sup>67</sup> *Auftragstaktik* and initiative are not illustrated with distinct case studies, but they can be found described as side aspects of two historical examples. The author claimed that the execution of initiative was to be based on thorough assessment of the situation, which can



only be achieved by officers whose understanding of combined warfare and operational concept of larger units occurs early in his career.<sup>68</sup> To avoid arbitrary actions and initiative “beyond the right limits,” the aim of the case studies is to illustrate these two prerequisites.<sup>69</sup> The first case study (depicting initiative) uses examples from the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 to discuss dispersed formations and their effects on command and control, firepower, and protection against enemy fire. It describes the need for independent action by lower echelon leaders and individual soldiers, but stresses that the will to stay linked within the units and to the next higher echelon must be ingrained into soldiers and leaders at all levels.<sup>70</sup> The second case study discusses the requirements for orders and the leeway of subordinates based on the example of the Battle of St. Privat on 18 August 1870. Evidence from this case study holds that orders should encompass adequate guidance, especially in terms of the intent or purpose of the operation, boundaries on the battlefield as well as communication and coordination.<sup>71</sup> Subordinates are “never to lose sight of the common concept of the battle (*gemeinsamen Gefechtszweck*).”<sup>72</sup> Without being specific about individual commander’s decisions during the battle, the case study is most likely referring to General Steinmetz’s premature frontal attack east of Gravelotte, which resulted in the unnecessary slaughter of the Prussian First Army before the decisive flanking attack of the Guard Corps and the Saxon Corps had even started.

Overall, the 1906 analysis is much more aware of the risks and limitations coming with independent actions of commanders at the different levels. While the need for dispersed formations is stressed, especially given the increased firepower available to *commanders* at the beginning of the twentieth century, the author stressed the need to maintain communications between the echelons. Initiative is no longer depicted as a value in itself; its extent has to be shaped to the necessities and possibilities of the specific situation on the battlefield.

### **Additional Facets of the Execution of Initiative**

Two additional facets of initiative have to be reviewed to complement the execution of initiative: the independent actions of soldiers, non-commissioned officers, and junior officers at the lowest tactical levels; and developments on the Western Front leading to the race to the sea, and the loss of operational level maneuver.

It is interesting that in contrast to the fact that the different doctrinal sources stressed the need for independent actions at the lowest level

as early as 1812, there were no historical examples chosen to illustrate how this initiative should look. On a regular basis, sources covering the above-mentioned wars included accounts that battalions or regiments lost most or all of their officers during the battle. The increased precision of infantry weapons, which allowed for deliberate targeting of leaders, led some soldiers to downplay the physical danger of battle. As one enlisted Prussian soldier at Königgrätz sarcastically observed: “Nah, we’ll come out of this in fine shape. The dogs are aiming only at our first lieutenants.”<sup>73</sup> Despite the commonplace nature of leader losses, reports that those high losses led to a breakdown of units are rare. Moltke wrote that during the battle of Spicheren, infantry brigades with losses of more than 20 percent and a single battalion with 33 percent casualties were still capable of attacking. Among all branches, out of the 6,909 casualties in that battle, 234 were officers.<sup>74</sup> While representing less than 3 percent of the total casualties, it is a near-certainty that among those casualties, infantry company grade officers were most likely over-represented. Understood in that light, it very likely meant the near-extinction of junior officers in the front line battalions. Hence it seems to be safe to state that the efforts to engrain a spirit of taking the initiative in the absence of orders (or leaders) and train soldiers in a realistic way had been successful.

This apparent success may be why the General Staff considered didactic examples unnecessary in the 1887 or 1906 manuals. In addition, while regulations required officers to be educated, non-commissioned officers and soldiers of the rank-and-file possessed only basic education; while able to read and write, they were probably not too keen on reading professional texts and weren’t expected to have done so. Thus, initiative at the lowest tactical level remained limited in scope: a company with one platoon in the skirmish line was approximately 150 steps wide and deep.<sup>75</sup> Initiative would consist of soldiers utilizing the terrain in closest proximity, firing independently, keeping eye contact with the leaders, and moving in the assigned direction in line with the unit and continuing the assault or defense when the leaders were killed. Hence there was little in the way of the education of the common soldiery about which to write. In addition, acting independently *per se* threatened the cohesion and discipline of the army. Provided in carefully measured doses during training it was a successful technique, but written examples might have had the unintended consequence of dampening the devotion and discipline necessary to move over open terrain toward enemy lines while sustaining heavy casualties.

When World War I started, the German Army went to war with the mindset about initiative described in this chapter. It was combat-proven in the wars of 1864, 1866, 1870, and validated by the Imperial Japanese Army's experience in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905.<sup>76</sup> The planned defense of East Prussia contained all the elements of initiative described in the historical examples from the Franco-Prussian War. The campaign plan foresaw luring the Russians, separated by the Masurian Lakes and the layout of their railway net, deep into East Prussia where each of the two Russian armies could be defeated in detail. The commander of I Corps, General Hermann von François, disregarded the orders issued by Eighth Army commander General Maximilian von Prittwitz to defend Königsberg, and decided instead to engage the Russian First Army, attacking north of the Masurian Lakes, directly at the border. He did not inform army headquarters of his intent beforehand, and fought a successful battle that only became known to the higher army when the corps artillery requested ammunition resupply.<sup>77</sup> No consequences followed. Three days later the first major battle was fought at Gumbinnen, when in accordance with the campaign plan Russian General Rennenkampf's First Army, attacking in the north, was first checked and then defeated the next day.<sup>78</sup> General von Prittwitz, however, based on reports that the Second Russian Army under General Samsonov had crossed the border, lost his nerve and informed the Army High Command (*Oberste Heeresleitung, OHL*) in Koblenz that he had decided to break off the battle and had ordered a general withdrawal behind the Vistula River.<sup>79</sup> This would have jeopardized not only the defense of East Prussia – with the united Russian armies being superior to the German forces available – but also the campaign plan for the Western Front, since the defense of eastern Germany and ultimately Berlin would have required the deployment of additional forces from the West. Von Prittwitz was relieved along with the chief of staff; Paul von Beneckendorff und von Hindenburg and his chief of staff Erich Ludendorff took over.

The general withdrawal was not executed; instead, all forces except a cavalry division were thrown at the Second Russian Army south of the Masurian Lakes. While the envelopment was developing and an initial attack into the Russian left flank was to take place, von François decided upon his own judgment to delay the attack. He had to be urged twice to attack by Ludendorff.<sup>80</sup> What followed was a textbook example of operational art, the successful envelopment of an unaware enemy, disrupting the Second Russian Army. Subsequently the Russian First

Army in the north was driven from East-Prussian soil, although the attempt to decisively defeat it failed. The scheme of independent operations continued on the eastern front for the remainder of the war, the sheer width of the terrain and the relatively smaller number of forces facilitating operational maneuver by both sides.

On the Western Front, commanders of the seven German armies concentrated from north to south along the border enjoyed the same leeway as their counterpart in East Prussia. They were to follow a modified version of the so-called Schlieffen Plan – the basic idea was that the right wing (First, Second, and Third Army) would wheel into the French Army's left flank and push it against Alsace, Lorraine, and the Swiss border.<sup>81</sup> The difference between the east and the west was that the multi-army operation in the west required synchronization by OHL, whereas Eighth Army in East Prussia operated independently. Ignoring this need and the restrictions on independent action of subordinated commanders his uncle had imposed during the Franco-Prussian War, the Chief of Staff of the High Command, Helmut Johannes Ludwig von Moltke (the younger), kept the headquarters initially in Berlin and moved it then to Koblenz and later Luxemburg.<sup>82</sup> The subsequent positions were still too far behind the main thrust to allow for effective command and control. Moltke accepted the situation because by doing it this way he also sought to prevent the mercurial Emperor William II from intervening in daily operations. He left the coordination of the advance of First, Second, and Third Armies to the army commanders with at first informal and later formal authority in the hands of Second Army's commander, General Karl von Bülow.<sup>83</sup> This odd command structure led to repeated occasions on which the three armies would request from each other mutual support or flank protection, and occasions when the individual commanders had to weigh the needs for a combined approach against their individual army's advance while lacking the information required to make a professional assessment.<sup>84</sup> A decisive battle against the shattered French Fifth Army was prevented because of von Bülow's inability to coordinate a combined approach of the three German armies.<sup>85</sup> On the 27 August, Moltke restored the independence of Alexander von Kluck's First Army, which as a result of the losses and the distance of 140 kilometers to its railhead was so exhausted that the plan to bypass Paris to the west was no longer realistic.<sup>86</sup> The increased activity of the French and the British Expeditionary Force required close coordination of the advancing armies in this decisive phase, but OHL in Luxemburg had received no reports from First or Second Army on

1 or 2 September. On the evening of the 2nd Moltke decided, based on suspicions, to change the concept of operations and have Second Army envelop the French between Verdun and Paris with First Army following as a flank protection. Meanwhile the commander of First Army, General von Kluck had – on his own – decided to change the direction of advance and conduct an attack into the western flank of Lanrezac's French Fifth Army.<sup>87</sup> Von Kluck informed OHL and his neighboring armies on 4 September and demanded to be kept informed about their operations.<sup>88</sup> This change in direction of First Army blocked Second Army's advance and opened the whole German advance to a flanking attack from the Paris area. Seeing that risk, Moltke issued an order to halt the First and Second Armies and secure the right flank, while Third Army was to move up to close a gap in the vicinity of Reims. While this order was issued, Third Army's commander had decided for a day of rest on 5 September, a decision he stood by even when he received Moltke's order and was informed that Second Army, his left neighbor, was advancing and thereby increasing the gap between the armies to 30 kilometers.<sup>89</sup> It was already too late when, on 5 September, the initial visit of Moltke's emissary Lieutenant Colonel Richard Hentsch to First Army's headquarters for the first time brought the information of the general situation together with the knowledge and plans of the commander on the ground. The French attack from Paris had already hit First Army's IV Reserve Corps protecting the right flank.<sup>90</sup> Still, the lack of the ability and will to communicate prevented a coordinated reaction by First and Second Armies, to say nothing of OHL.<sup>91</sup> The outcome is well known: French and British forces were able to penetrate the gaps between the armies and threaten their flanks. On 9 September, Hentsch's second visit led to von Moltke's decision to break off the battle and withdraw to a defensive position above the Marne River. Having failed to execute the updated version of the Schlieffen Plan, the German Army and its opponents settled into static trench warfare characterized by an almost complete absence of large unit commander's initiative until the final months of the war.

It is outside of the scope and purpose of this work to discuss the details and reasons for the development, which led to the failure of the German offensive. What is clear, however, is that the spirit of independent operations by large unit commanders still prevailed at the beginning of World War I. The specific conditions of the Eastern Front, where the replacement of Prittwitz by the strong command team of von Hindenburg and Ludendorff, prevented a catastrophe and helped overcome

the difficulties caused by the very independent von François, allowed for successful independent operations. In the West, where the need for coordination was much greater, the problems arising from overly independent commanders became obvious, and Moltke proved unable to resolve them as his uncle had done in 1870.

## Conclusion

This chapter has detailed the emergence of *Auftragstaktik*. Two different factors influenced its development at the tactical and operational levels. At the tactical level, the increasing accuracy and firepower of infantry weapons and artillery required the increased dispersal of assault formations from the linear tactics to open lines. This came at the price of degraded command and control by leaders at the lower tactical echelons. Hence the autonomous conduct of battle and the will to act upon one's own judgment within the purpose of the operation and the higher commander's intent had to be established. The discussion of doctrinal development depicted how initially the first category of initiative, the autonomy to decide how a mission is fulfilled, was established by 1876. The second category of initiative, the independent decision and action within the higher commander's intent, can be found as early as 1888.

The growth of the armies and the increased geographical extension of the battlefield was already established in Napoleon's time and required that commanders at the operational level maneuver independently and move to the sound of the guns for the concentration of the armies. The Prussian Army only belatedly introduced this principle with the development of the General Staff officer system and the 1869 instructions for large unit commanders. Huge efforts were made to depict and explain the value of higher commander's initiative and the need for them to make decisions upon their professional judgment, even in defiance of written orders, if in their estimate of the situation such a deviation was warranted. This cultural shift within the Prussian/German Army contributed in large measure to official acceptance of overly independent commanders (e.g. von François) who were unwilling to accept supporting roles in the battle and unlikely to accept interference in their operations by their own higher commands. The independence of those commanders lay outside of the initiative model introduced in the previous chapter. During the wars of the second half of the nineteenth century, fought without contiguous frontlines and the resulting threats to the flanks, the negative effects of such arbitrariness were less visible; as long as neighboring units would march towards the sound of the cannons, battle success was still possible. Moltke the Elder's dominant

personality counterbalanced any potential negative effects. The 1906 manual and the historical examples illustrating it stressed the importance of senior commanders' keeping the concept of operations in sight. Its text expresses all three categories of initiative.<sup>92</sup> The independent commanders mentioned above would argue that all their decisions were based upon their professional assessments. The extent to which they, based upon incomplete information, created their own reality to justify decisions that could also have been made out of ambition or for other reasons, remains an open question.



## Notes

1. Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke, "Aus den Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24. Juni 1869," in *Moltkes Militärische Werke, Zweiter Theil, Die Tätigkeit als Chef des Generalstabs im Frieden*, ed. Preußischer Generalstab (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1900), 178. Translation as in Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke, On the Art of War, Selected Writings*, trans. Daniel J Hughes and Harry Bell (New York: Random House, 1993), 184-185.

2. For a detailed description of the change process see Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army 1640-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), Chapter 2-4.

3. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, 169-170.

4. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, 63. Clausewitz himself became a victim of the struggle between conservative and reform forces in Prussia. Having for what seemed to him patriotic reason served in the Russian Army against Napoleon in 1812 he was seen as politically unreliable by King Friedrich Wilhelm III. His position as administrative director of the Kriegsakademie is often misunderstood as him influencing the officer education in the Prussian Army. His work *On War*, which he started writing in this time and which was published in 1832 after being edited by his wife, became famous only when Moltke named it as an important source for his successes in the wars. See Werner Hahlweg, ed. *Vom Kriege, Hinterlassenes Werk des Generals Carl von Clausewitz* (Bonn, Germany: Ferd. Dümmlers Verlag, 1980), 29-34, 58.

5. Hahlweg, *Vom Kriege, Hinterlassenes Werk des Generals Carl von Clausewitz*, 58.

6. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 2-3.

7. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 3.

8. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee* (Berlin: Georg Decker Königl. Geh. Oberhofbuchdrucker, 1812), v-xiv.

9. Citino, *The German Way of War*, 130.

10. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1812, 103-104.

11. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 103.

12. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, rev. 25 May 1867 (Berlin: Decker Königl. Geh. Oberhofbuchdrucker, 1847), III-XII; Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 2-3.

13. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1847, 154-164, compared to Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1812, 103-115.

14. The 1847 version of the regulations still enforced strict control about maneuvers with the exception of the skirmisher line; the changes until 1876 included columns down to the level of platoon split in half and sections to avoid the effects of enemy fire on closed formations. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1847, 91-96.



15. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 137-138, 146, 150, 152-153.
16. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 146.
17. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 193-194 see also Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 106-107.
18. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie* (signed 1888) (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1889), 109.
19. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 89-91.
20. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 109-110.
21. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 129-130, 141.
22. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 129-130.
23. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzir-Reglement für die Infanterie*, III.
24. Bayerisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie* (Munich, 1906), V-VI. In 1906 Bavaria as a few other German states had still retained a war ministry, the Prussian Ministry of War however was the one dominating the development of the armed forces in the German Empire seeking interoperability of the different state contingents. Both the Bavarian and the Prussian 1906 *Exerzier-Reglement* are similar; the Bavarian version is cited here for the lack of the first 16 pages in the Prussian document the author was able to review.
25. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 130 Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, including changes until August 1906 (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1906), 78.
26. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 130 Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 126a.
27. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 105-106, 40-41.
28. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 130 Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 90-91.
29. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 130 Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 84.
30. Bayerisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie* (Munich, Germany, 1906), IV.
31. Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke, “Aus den Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24. Juni 1869,” in *Moltkes Militärische Werke, Zweiter Theil, Die Tätigkeit als Chef des Generalstabs im Frieden*, ed. Preußischer Generalstab (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1900), 175-176. Daniel J. Hughes, ed., *Moltke, On the Art of War, Selected Writings*, trans. Daniel J Hughes and Harry Bell (New York: Random House, 1993), 171-172. The 1910 edition, named essentials of higher troop command explicitly stated at the beginning of the manual that applicable parts written by field marshal Moltke had been retained. Deutsches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 53. Grundzüge der höheren Truppenführung*, (Berlin: Reichsdruckerei, 1910), 4.
32. Moltke, *Aus den Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24. Juni 1869*, 167-169.

33. Moltke, *Aus den Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24*, 179-181.

34. Moltke, *Aus den Verordnungen für die höheren Truppenführer vom 24*, 174. The 1910 version stated: "Where subordinate leaders wait for orders the opportunity of the circumstances will never be utilized." Deutsches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 53. Grundzüge der höheren Truppenführung*, 13.

35. Deutsches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 53. Grundzüge der höheren Truppenführung*, 17.

36. Deutsches Kriegsministerium, *D.V.E. Nr. 53. Grundzüge der höheren Truppenführung*, 16-18.

37. In addition to the above mentioned conflicts, Prussian troops were involved in the two wars fought over the control of the duchesses of Schleswig and Holstein against Denmark and troops of the German Empire were involved in colonial struggles, e.g., against the Boxer Movement in China.

38. Volume 4 of Moltke's *Militärische Werke* was assembled and published by the military history section of the General Staff. Although there is no proof of Moltke's personal involvement or his specific selection of historic case studies the work expresses the official history respectively the official thought of exemplary doctrinal behavior. Therefore they are specifically valuable for an analysis of the contemporary understanding of *Auftragstaktik*. For details see Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 15-17.

39. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 76, 79-83.

40. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Extracts from Moltke's Military Correspondence Pertaining of the War of 1870-71*, ed. Historical Section of the Prussian General Staff, Berlin 1896, translated by Harry Bell Ft Leavenworth, KS, CGSC Library, 1910. The order was transmitted from the Prussian Royal Headquarters to General Steinmetz's First Army on the 3rd of August 1870, 11:00am.

41. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 79-80; Geoffrey Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War; The German Conquest of France in 1870-1871* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 108.

42. An analysis of the orders issued during the early stages shows that the change from directives to orders tended to result in directly tasking the corps level. Occasionally the orders were in addition to informing the respective army headquarters directly sent to the corps itself. It remains unclear whether this meant a direct command and control relationship to the royal headquarters or was a result of the limitations of telegraph and messenger communications.

43. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 79-80.

44. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Extracts from Moltke's Correspondence*, No. 112, No. 125, No. 127.

45. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 82-83. Steinmetz's actions are inconclusive, while requesting to advance closer to Metz he rejected to push his advance guards up front and when one of his divisions engaged the withdrawing French at Columbey he ordered them to break off combat. This inconclusiveness however may have been caused by very ambiguous orders by Moltke, which stated that a close coordination with Second Army was necessary, the concentration was not to be executed before the positions of the French were known and a passage of First Army north or south of Metz was to be expected. See Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Extracts from Moltke's Correspondence*, No. 137; Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 146-147.

46. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 83-84.

47. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Extracts from Moltke's Correspondence*, No. 177-180; Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 84.
48. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 84.
49. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 87.
50. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 133.
51. Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke, "Kurze Übersicht des Feldzuges 1864 gegen Dänemark," in *Moltkes Militärische Werke, Band III, Kriegsgeschichtliche Arbeiten, Zweiter Theil*, edited by Preußischer Generalstab (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1899), 77-78.
52. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 134.
53. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 134.
54. Moltke, *Kurze Übersicht des Feldzuges 1864*, 78.
55. Gordon A. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz, Prussia's Victory over Austria 1866* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975), 84-86.
56. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 134.
57. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 86.
58. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 134-135.
59. Thilo Krieg in his biography of General von Alvensleben shows that it was less the sound of the guns but more a request for support by 7th Division's commander, General Eduard von Fransecky that led to the decision to advance. Von Alvensleben did however not wait for an order by his division commander. It is remarkable that he did so, when he just had received an order from his division commander to take defensive positions without further advancing. Thilo Krieg, *Constantin von Alvensleben, General der Infanterie, Ein militärisches Lebensbild* (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1903), 62-64.
60. Thilo Krieg, *Constantin von Alvensleben, General der Infanterie, Ein militärisches Lebensbild*, 135-136.
61. Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 109-110, 142, 149-151.
62. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 117.
63. Hughes, *Moltke, On the Art of War*, 140-142.
64. Citino, *The German Way of War*, 178.
65. Wawro, *The Franco-Prussian War*, 119.
66. Shortly after the war, Moltke wrote an initial illustration of the early border battles in the first weeks of the Franco-Prussian War. Helmut Karl Bernhard von Moltke, "Kurze Darstellung der Ereignisse vom 15. Juli bis 17. August 1870," in *Moltkes Militärische Werke, Band III, Kriegsgeschichtliche Arbeiten, Zweiter Theil*, edited by Preußischer Generalstab (Berlin, Germany: Ernst Siegfried Mittler und Sohn, 1899), 157-173.
67. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, VII-XII.
68. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 257.
69. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 257.
70. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 42-44.
71. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 105-106.
72. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 106.

73. Max Jähns, “Die Schlacht von Königgrätz,” Leipzig, 1876, quoted in Craig, *The Battle of Königgrätz*, 110.

74. Moltke, *Kurze Darstellung der Ereignisse vom 15. Juli bis 17. August 1870*, 186.

75. The Prussian doctrine stated that the main body of a company or the support element of a skirmish line would march 150 steps behind the line. The width of a company depended on the number of platoons skirmishing. That would in general be one platoon of 25 soldiers at a distance of 5 to 6 steps each. See Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie der Königlich Preußischen Armee*, 1847, 68-69.

76. Freytag-Loringhoven, *Das Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie vom 29. Mai 1906*, 7-8.

77. John Sweetman, *Tannenberg 1914* (London: Cassel & Co., 2002), 73-74. The plan to attack the deploying Russian forces as a shaping operation already close to the border to create a favorable force ratio had been intensively discussed. François was a proponent for this early attack although it has to remain open, whether his motivation was to prevent giving up East-Prussian territory and whether he had thought through the effects on the whole defense plan. See Dennis E. Showalter, *Tannenberg, Clash of Empires* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1991), 155-156.

78. Sweetman, *Tannenberg 1914*, 83.

79. Sweetman, *Tannenberg 1914*, 83-86.

80. Sweetman, *Tannenberg 1914*, 116.

81. Holger H. Herwig, *The Marne, 1914, The Opening of World War I and the Battle That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2009), 40-44.

82. See pages 22-24.

83. Herwig, *The Marne, 1914*, 120-122.

84. Herwig, *The Marne*, 151, 161, 218.

85. Herwig, *The Marne*, 189-190.

86. Herwig, *The Marne*, 218-220.

87. Herwig, *The Marne*, 220-221. Although Kluck's decision is often criticized, one has to consider that this course of action had successfully been gamed in the case study Freytag II during the 1905 Staff Ride West. Kluck's chief of staff, then Major Kuhl, had participated in this staff ride, which was presided by Schlieffen himself. *Ibid.*, 222.

89. Herwig, *The Marne*, 222-223.

89. Herwig, *The Marne*, 235-237.

90. Herwig, *The Marne*, 238-241.

91. Herwig, *The Marne*, 246, 248-250, 254.

92. See table on page 7 of this thesis.

### Chapter 3

## Low Tactical Level Initiative in the Synchronized Warfare of World War I

While I was expeditiously carrying out the preparations for the attack, ordering the machine-gun platoons into position, and organizing assault squads, the order came from the rear: “Württemberg Mountain Battalion withdraws” . . . The battalion order to withdraw resulted in all units of the Rommel detachment marching back to Mount Cragonza, except for the hundred riflemen and six heavy machine-gun crews who remained with me. I debated breaking off the engagement and returning to Mount Cragonza.

No! The battalion order was given without knowledge of the situation on the south slopes of the Matajur. Unfinished business remained. . . . We ventured to attack in spite of our ridiculously small numbers.

– Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*<sup>1</sup>

Popular perceptions of World War I are dominated by images of the Western Front – the horrific positional warfare characterized from October 1914 to March 1915 by the total inability of either side to maneuver at the operational level. The loss of operational flexibility resulted directly from the increasing importance of firepower, machine-guns, and artillery compared to maneuver, the combined effects of which enforced a close coordination between the infantry and its supporting arms. Under such conditions the complex, precisely coordinated fire plans executed by immobile heavy-caliber artillery stifled initiative of infantry formations. Cavalry, the other maneuver arm, was useless in this context, playing almost no role on the Western Front.

However, this is not the whole story. On the Eastern Front, the density of forces and the vast space allowed for operational level movements throughout the war, leading to a series of more or less successful envelopment attempts from the Łódź campaign in late 1914 to the Kerensky-Offensive of 1917.<sup>2</sup> Those battles were fought based on the doctrinal background and mindset described in chapter two of this work (the selected phases overlap) and will therefore not further be analyzed.

At the tactical level, synchronized methodical battle dominated warfare in the trenches. The exercise of initiative remained an ideal, though often an unrealized one. Tactical innovations, the result of attempts by both Allied and German forces to break the stalemate,

eventually restored initiative to a dominant position with the techniques of deep defense and “storm trooper” tactics.

### **Doctrine Discussion**

With the new realities at the Western Front, the prewar doctrine had become inappropriate by December 1914. The 1906 drill regulations had pointed out that the infantry had to “herd its inherent urge for offensive advance. . . Forward on the enemy, may it cost what it costs!”<sup>3</sup> Utilization of the terrain was described on a single page; the defense was seen as subordinate to the offense.<sup>4</sup> The defense being by definition a yielding of initiative to an opponent, the German Army (like all of its contemporaries) proved culturally resistant to either engaging in defensive operations or yielding ground once gained. To prevent a potential loss of terrain, in the first months of the war the forward trenches were packed with large numbers of soldiers, which resulted in high losses during the intensive Allied preparatory artillery barrages.<sup>5</sup> In light of this, the OHL modified tactical doctrine on two occasions. In the winter of 1916-1917, a new defensive doctrine espousing the defense-in-depth concept was promulgated; in the following winter the offensive doctrine was updated to incorporate recognition of the “empty battlefield.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Defense-in-Depth**

When Erich Ludendorff became the chief of staff (*Erster Quartiermeistergeneral*) of OHL on 20 August 1916, he undertook intensive efforts to monitor the tactical developments at the front and within two weeks ordered the adoption of the defensive doctrine.<sup>7</sup> Prior to this decision, Colonel Fritz von Lossberg had determined that a report or order between front line and a division headquarters under battle conditions would take between eight and ten hours to travel one way. Such a delay rendered reports and orders irrelevant given the speed with which the tactical situation changed. Lossberg concluded that poor communication links thus required giving full freedom of action to lower levels to facilitate effective reaction to changed conditions. Hence frontline battalion commanders received the autonomy to react to enemy attacks in their sector without waiting for guidance; their regimental commanders’ roles were reduced to providing support and reinforcements. Divisions received comparable authority within their sectors. Reinforcements fell under the command of the respective frontline unit, without regard for the commander’s rank.<sup>8</sup> Based upon the experiences and reports of different units and a French document captured in 1915, the *Grundsätze für die Abwehrschlacht im Stellungskrieg* (*Principles of Command in*

*the Defensive Battle in Position Warfare*) were developed.<sup>9</sup> The defense-in-depth concept stressed a flexible reaction to enemy attacks:

**For the troops the following is applicable for the battle: . . . The defender is not bound to one place; instead he is justified to fight in a mobile manner in the battle zone, which means to attack or withdraw whatever is required. . . For tactical action best suiting the concept of battle a certain level of leeway has to remain with the leader – also the mid-level leader [emphasis in the original]. This is applicable to all branches. The conduct of battle according to this concept requires a great deal of initiative.**<sup>10</sup>

Frontline battalion commanders received the authority to withdraw forces from the outpost zone under pressure of a general attack, to order counterattacks on their own authority, and to order to the front other battalions in their sector as reinforcements.<sup>11</sup> Low-level leaders and individual soldiers in the outpost zone were to independently shift from their trenches to strongholds to engage an attacking enemy from flanks or rear and conduct local counterthrusts (*Gegenstöße*) to expel enemy forces from the battle zone.<sup>12</sup> The field manual accordingly stated: “The strength, in the offensive defense too, does not lie in the masses of troops but in the skillful employment [of forces at hand], especially in the coordination of different weapons and the speed and energy of the action. Leadership – down to the squad leader – plays a crucial role.”<sup>13</sup>

### **“Storm Trooper” Tactics**

The modification of the offensive doctrine was less groundbreaking. “Storm trooper” tactics combined the traditional offensive spirit and willingness to sacrifice of the German Army with increased training on newly-developed weapons, improved coordination of infantry and artillery, and the concept of deep operations. The concept paper, published on 1 January 1918 as *Der Angriff im Stellungskrieg* (*The Attack in Positional Warfare*), became the blueprint for the German offensives of 1918. As with the changes to defensive doctrine, a captured French analytical paper contributed to the development process, as well as German units’ best practices.<sup>14</sup> The fundamental idea of “Storm Trooper” tactics was the deep penetration of the enemy defenses whose ultimate aim was to set the conditions for an operational breakthrough. Instead of destroying enemy forces *in situ*, attacks now should disrupt the enemy’s defensive framework, bypass strongholds, and maintain constant pressure on a withdrawing enemy by the assault units while



follow-on forces reduced strongholds and provide flank protection. The manual states:

The surprised enemy must not be allowed to reconstitute. His countermeasures have to be neutralized through a rapid advance of the attack. The assault has to be executed quickly, based on the knowledge that the protection of flank and rear and fire support will be provided from behind. The danger that the momentum of the attack will be lost is great. Premature culmination has to be overcome through the energy of the leaders up front. . . . **Everything depends upon the quick and independent actions of all involved, based on the concept of operations as well as the follow-up of artillery and ammunition supplies** [emphasis in the original].<sup>15</sup>

For the assaulting infantry, small unit initiative was crucial, while artillery support was centralized, precise and of short duration aimed at neutralizing enemy defense efforts instead of destroying them.<sup>16</sup> The advantage of having the ability to choose the time and place of the attack and plan for details loosened restraints on independent action.<sup>17</sup>

The German answer to the static environment of the Western Front by 1916-1917 is as remarkable as it was counterintuitive and contrary to the Allied approach of centralizing command, more detailed and complicated fire support plans, and subordinating the infantry to its support weapons. The spirit of initiative within the Prusso-German Army retained its premier value within doctrine while the increased effectiveness of heavy weapons required ever-closer coordination of maneuvering infantry and its support weapons. This allowed for timely reactions and the avoidance of devastating enemy firepower in defense and offense.

### **Execution of Initiative**

The doctrinal discussion shows that the new and unexpected nature of combat at the Western Front led to a development of doctrine based upon analyzing the experiences and good practices of units on the ground. This inductive way of adapting doctrine naturally leads to less exciting findings in the review of the conduct of operations.

In his book *Infantry Attacks*, then-Lieutenant Erwin Rommel describes the conduct of operations at the platoon to battalion level. In his accounts about trench warfare in the Argonne and the High Vosges, the factors affecting frontline practices that influenced later changes to doctrine are traceable. He describes the difficulties of



proceeding against the massive firepower of machine-guns, sustaining the momentum of an attack, and defending newly-seized terrain against enemy counterattacks when the enemy's artillery fire sealed off the attackers from reinforcements and resupplies.<sup>18</sup> In his subsequent discussion of events from mid-1915 onward, the use of terrain through infiltration and distinguishing between assault or storm squads, detailing of specific elements to seal off flanks and reduce strongholds bypassed by the former, handle prisoners, and provide resupply in ammunition or entrenching tools constitute the measures to overcome the before-mentioned challenges.<sup>19</sup> The quotation at the beginning of this chapter shows that the elements of "Storm Trooper" tactics developed for trench warfare applied equally to mountain warfare, where the freedom to maneuver had not been restrained to the same extent. For the defense, Rommel's narrative depicts the need to avoid enemy artillery and especially heavy mortar fire through thinning out the first lines and allowing for flexibility in the search for cover.<sup>20</sup>

In *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Erich Maria Remarque describes the discipline required to halt soldiers after their fighting withdrawal from the outpost zone, stop and then fight to defend at the main line of resistance to eventually clear the outpost zone in a counterthrust.<sup>21</sup> The chaotic nature of the elastic defense made the fire team or squad the principal tactical element carrying the fight from strongholds in flank or rear of the enemy advance.<sup>22</sup> Lieutenant General Wilhelm von Balck stressed that the initiative to withdraw from the outpost zone should not generally be delegated to the troops because this tended to lead to a backwards surge before a true picture of the enemy's intentions could become clear.<sup>23</sup> Well-exercised initiative, on the other hand, stopped attacks of superior forces, if counter-thrusts by small units threatened its flanks. He describes examples where small fire teams of one leader and two to three riflemen caught up to 200 prisoners through unexpected counter-thrusts.<sup>24</sup>

With Germany suffering from the consequences of the deadlock of attritional warfare on the Western Front, the idea to extend the successful techniques of offensive warfare from the tactical to the operational level was logical. The 1918 offensives in the end failed for a number of reasons, including a lack of operational movement, supply capabilities, and resources. Gains based on random success of the attacking units at the tactical level, all operating upon initiative to keep up the drive of the attack, led to the need to man and defend large pieces of terrain absent of operational or strategic significance.<sup>25</sup>

## Conclusion

The creation of specific defensive and offensive doctrine for trench warfare does not constitute a general adoption of the understanding of *Auftragstaktik* similar to the developments described in chapter two. The fundamental understanding of initiative and independent actions of commanders remained unchanged. They were applied to the new circumstances of warfare at the Western Front to benefit from its advantages when avoiding the effects of enemy firepower became crucial. The leeway of junior commanders and individual soldiers to flexibly change positions within a defined zone to avoid the preparatory fires and defend based on their own initiative clearly demonstrates that in the Prusso-German Army there existed already in 1914-1915 a common understanding of category one initiative. The question, whether independent counterthrusts were an integrated element of the defense and thus also part of the category one leeway, or whether they constituted an independent action within the higher commander's intent, is debatable. Assault or "Storm Trooper" units initiated attacks based upon detailed intelligence and planning. The freedom to operate as deemed necessary to overcome unexpected enemy strongholds or fields of fire, based upon the understanding that the forward commander has the best insight into the changing situation, reflected the concept of the second category of initiative. Finally, the example of Rommel in mountain warfare quoted at the beginning of this chapter indicates that the spirit to act upon professional knowledge outside or against given orders remained intact culturally within the army. It further shows that this third category of initiative, previously only visible with large unit commanders, had by 1916 become ingrained into junior officers' understanding of their freedom of action.

## Notes

1. Erwin Rommel, *Infantry Attacks* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009), 223.
2. Citino, *The German Way of War*, 234.
3. Bayerisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 81.
4. Bayerisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 91-92, 112.
5. Timothy T. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine: The Changes in German Tactical Doctrine during the First World War* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute, 1981), 10.
6. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 4.
7. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 11-12.
8. David T. Zabecki, "Defense in-Depth," in *The Encyclopedia of World War I, A Political, Social, and Military History*, ed. Spencer C. Tucker (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2005), 342-343; Oberste Heeresleitung, "Die Abwehr im Stellungskriege," in *Urkunden der Obersten Heeresleitung über ihre Tätigkeit 1916/1918*, ed. Erich Ludendorff (Berlin: E.S. Mittler und Sohn, 1921), 608-609.
9. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 13-14.
10. "Die Abwehr im Stellungskriege," 607.
11. Zabecki, *Defense in-Depth*, 343.
12. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 15-16; "Die Abwehr im Stellungskriege", 618.
13. "Die Abwehr im Stellungskriege," 619.
14. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 34.
15. "Der Angriff im Stellungskriege," 642.
16. Lupfer, *The Dynamics of Doctrine*, 36-40.
17. "Der Angriff im Stellungskriege," 645.
18. Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*, 57-59.
19. Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*, 66, 72.
20. Rommel, *Infantry Attacks*, 64, 69.
21. Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues* (Cologne, Germany: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1959), 106-110.
22. Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues*, 248-249.
23. Wilhelm Balck, *Entwicklung der Taktik im Weltkrieg* (Berlin, Germany: Verlag von R. Eischenschmidt, 1922), 269. The book was published after the war, therefore it serves a dual role in this thesis. The historical examples serve the understanding of the execution of initiative during the war while his recommendations have influence on the developments in the interwar period, which will be covered in the next chapter.
24. Balck, *Entwicklung der Taktik im Weltkrieg*, 277.
25. Williamson A. Murray, "The West at War 1914-18," in *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare, The Triumph of the West*, ed. Geoffrey Parker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 291.



## Chapter 4

### An Army Shaped for Initiative Versus Detailed Tactical Control By Hitler

Ideally LT Delica, who was senior on the ground, should have taken charge. His glider, however, had landed a fair way to the south and his squad was busy dealing with its target position, a 75mm-gun casemate. Unable to contact [LT] Witzig or Delica, SGT Helmut Wenzel of fourth squad took command and established headquarters for *Sturmgruppe Granit* inside the machine-gun casemate, which his men had captured minutes earlier. SGT Wenzel . . . was fully familiar with the mission and continued with the plan. He had his radioman establish contact with [his company commander CPT] Koch in order to inform the overall commander when his men had taken their main objectives, as well as to gain situational awareness as to the whereabouts of the relieving troops. Meanwhile, the other squads had landed in proximity to their targets and set about dealing with them. As Witzig described it, “they didn’t need to ask questions. They had their orders, and they did them.”<sup>1</sup>

— Nicholas A. Murray,  
“Capturing Eben-Emael, The Key to the Low Countries”

Despite shortfalls in planning, resourcing, and execution, the 1918 German offensives in the West proved the potentially decisive power of the maneuver aspect of deep operations based on well-executed combined arms warfare. They also laid bare the limits of contemporary operational mobility and reach. The same can be said for the Allies’ use of massed tanks in the offensive at Cambrai late the previous year. However, following the Armistice and ratification of the peace treaty, all the former belligerents’ military institutions shifted from battle-driven innovation to survival in an atmosphere of fiscal austerity for all things military. Even more ominous for military planners, a wave of pacifism and an international movement for disarmament gained strength in years immediately following the Armistice.

The provisions of the Treaty of Versailles reduced the German Army, now renamed the *Reichswehr*, to 100,000 soldiers (93,000 men and 7,000 officers). Furthermore, this “army” was forbidden to possess modern weapons and was designed to be capable only of border security and internal control operations.<sup>2</sup> The task of demobilizing and reorganizing the old Imperial Army and establishing the *Reichswehr* went to General Hans von Seeckt, who became the chairman of the

Commission for the Peacetime Army Organization and subsequently the chief of the *Truppenamt*, the successor organization to the treaty-banned General Staff.<sup>3</sup> Born into a noble Pomeranian family in 1866, Von Seeckt received a liberal education rather than that of a cadet. Enrolled into the Emperor Alexander Guard Regiment as an officer-aspirant in 1885, he was commissioned in 1887 and selected for the General Staff course at the *Kriegsakademie* in 1893. Broadly educated and well-travelled, he was highly regarded in the General Staff Corps and rose steadily through the ranks.<sup>4</sup> During World War I, von Seeckt served initially as chief of staff at the army and army group level, saw maneuver warfare on the Western Front in 1914, and subsequently transferred to the Eastern Front. He made his reputation by successfully planning and executing major offensives, and countering enemy offensives, through mobile defense.<sup>5</sup> Although confronted with the gigantic tasks of downsizing an army while simultaneously defeating a communist uprising, on 1 December 1919 (after only one week as chief of the *Truppenamt*) he ordered a comprehensive study “to put the experience of the war in a broad light and collect this experience while the impressions won on the battlefield are still fresh and the experienced officers are still in leading positions.”<sup>6</sup>

The results of this comprehensive study provided the basis for a thorough review of doctrine that led to a new capstone document, *Army Regulation 487 Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* (Command and Combat Employment of the Combined Arms).<sup>7</sup> Part One of the manual was published in 1921 and addressed the fundamentals of combined arms warfare; Part Two, consisting of specific chapters on aerial and armored warfare, communications, and logistics, was issued in 1923.<sup>8</sup> It remained in force unchanged for ten years; even then, the 1933 *Truppenführung* (Troop Leading) manual’s principal difference from von Seeckt’s doctrine lay in the incorporation of emerging potentials caused by the rapid technological advancements.<sup>9</sup>

These doctrinal innovations resulted directly from the experience by all armies of the horrific attritional warfare in the trench systems of World War I. The multiple efforts to avoid such slaughters through decisive maneuver warfare centered around technological means and their application in warfare, with discussions about the role of tanks and the best form of air warfare as the most prominent topics. For this work those discussions are relevant only to a very limited degree, because the German approach to doctrinal change viewed technological instruments

not as ends in themselves but as means towards the execution of concepts in the art of war.<sup>10</sup>

### **The 1921 Command and Combat Employment of the Combined Arms**

Publication of *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* marked the German Army's transition into modern doctrine. No longer was the capstone doctrine predominantly an infantry manual with little reference to the supporting arms. The structure of the manual was fundamentally different from its predecessors, addressing the fundamentals of combined warfare first and integrating the modern means of warfare in its second part.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, more detailed manuals for the different arms were issued.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the manual was not restricted to the capabilities and arms permitted to Germany under the restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles; in his introduction to the manual, von Seeckt instead explicitly stated that the knowledge and doctrinal understanding of modern weapon systems was paramount, disregarding the fact that such weaponry might or might not be available to the *Reichswehr* in the next conflict.<sup>13</sup>

The various aspects of *Auftragstaktik* were now more prominent, covered in the first chapter compared to being relegated to the latter portions of the 1888 and 1906 manuals. The fundamentals of *Auftragstaktik* are not changed:

The foremost quality of a leader remains the willingness to take responsibility. All leaders must constantly stay aware and inculcate in their subordinates the awareness that forbearance and dereliction weigh heavier than making a mistake in the selection of an action.<sup>14</sup>

This quotation can be found word-for-word in the 1906 regulations; the section included in previous doctrine that warns against the risk of arbitrariness is omitted.<sup>15</sup> Instead, the description of when and why to deviate from orders is covered and explained in more detail:

The **mission** [emphasis in the original] designates the objective to achieve. The leader may not lose sight of it.

The **situation** [emphasis in the original] will seldom be clear enough to provide a detailed insight into the enemy disposition. Uncertainty is the general rule of war. . .

Based upon mission and situation the **decision** [emphasis in the original] is developed. If the mission does not suffice as a basis

for friendly action rendered insufficient by the development of events the [new] decision has to account for those developments.

Full responsibility for not executing or altering a mission remains with the leader. At all times he must act within the framework of the whole (im Rahmen des Ganzen). . . .

**No deviation is to be made from a decision taken without a grave reason** [emphasis in the original]. In the vicissitudes of war inflexible adherence to a decision can be a mistake. It is the art of command to identify when a new decision must be made.<sup>16</sup>

As we see at this point, the concept of *Auftragstaktik* is assumed to be well understood within the army, and the changes between the 1906 and 1921 manual are marginal. The fact that the potential for risk-taking to deviate into arbitrariness is omitted seems to indicate that the execution of initiative during World War I was not accompanied by the negative side effects that could be seen, for example, in the Franco-Prussian War. Reasons that this did not occur include perhaps better communications or a more professional officer corps.

### 1933 *Truppenführung* – Troop Leadership

*Truppenführung*, written under the auspices of Generals Ludwig Beck, Werner von Fritsch, and Otto von Stülpnagel, updated consideration of the incorporation of modern weapons in the *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen* according to contemporary levels of technological development achieved by 1933.<sup>17</sup> More significant from the perspective of this paper, however, was the new “Introduction,” whose fifteen highly philosophical paragraphs set the manual’s tone.<sup>18</sup>

The Introduction’s paragraphs constitute a *précis* of German understanding of warfare and doctrinal writing of the preceding 100 years. They restate Clausewitz’s fundamentals about the human aspect of warfare, friction, and the principle of the German art of war, the aim for the decisive annihilation of the enemy.<sup>19</sup> The paragraph about leadership is again (as in the 1921 *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*) nearly a word-for-word copy from the 1906 manual:

Every leader in all situations must exert, without evasion of responsibility, his whole personality. Willingness to take responsibility is the foremost quality of a leader. It should not be aimed at making arbitrary decisions with disregard of the



whole or not precisely following given orders and let a “know-all” manner take the place of obedience. Autonomy may not become arbitrariness. Autonomy however, utilized within the right limits, is the basis of great successes.<sup>20</sup>

The employment of soldiers and weapon systems in open, dispersed formations, which had become a rule rather than an exception during World War I and in the interwar period, led to an increased emphasis on the individual soldier’s autonomy. The manual states: “The emptiness of the battlefield (*Leere des Schlachtfeldes*) requires independently thinking and acting fighters, who exploit every situation well considered, decisively and boldly, deeply convinced that success depends on each individual.”<sup>21</sup> Comparing *Truppenführung* with its predecessor manuals’ respective sections, one sees that its description of autonomy turns back to the limitations of independence. The 1906 drill regulations had stressed the risk that an independent leader might go too far; the 1921 manual made no clear reference to this risk, but *Truppenführung* resurrected the danger of arrogance and arbitrariness.<sup>22</sup> The necessity to actively develop the situation – again a draw from the 1906 manual – is extended from “all leaders”<sup>23</sup> down to every soldier:

From the youngest soldier upwards, independent employment of all spiritual, intellectual and physical power is stipulated. Only in this way will the full capabilities of the troops be brought into effect in common action. . . . **Everyone, the highest leader as well as the youngest soldier has constantly to stay aware that forbearance and dereliction weigh heavier than making a mistake in the selection of an action** [emphasis in the original].<sup>24</sup>

The fact that autonomy and proactive action is described in two of the fifteen paragraphs of the introduction depicts the importance given to the topic.

Section 2 – leadership – of *Truppenführung* describes the concept of *Auftragstaktik* in similar but more precise terms than the 1921 manual:

The **mission** [emphasis in the original] designates the objective to achieve. The subordinate may not lose sight of it. *A mission that contains multiple tasks easily distracts from the essential (Hauptsache)* [italics indicate substantial addition to 1921 manual].

Uncertainty about the **situation** [emphasis in the original] is the general rule. Seldom can a detailed insight into the enemy disposition be won. . .

Based upon mission and situation the decision is developed. If the mission does not suffice as a basis for friendly action or has been rendered insufficient by the development of events, the [new] decision has to account for those developments. *Whoever changes a mission or does not accomplish it has to report this* [italics indicate substantial addition to 1921 manual] and takes sole responsibility for the results. At all times he has to act within the framework of the whole. . . .

No deviation is to be made from a decision taken without a grave reason. In the vicissitudes of war inflexible adherence to a decision can be a mistake. It is the art of command to identify in time, when and under which circumstances a new decision is required.

The leader has to allow for freedom of action of his subordinates as long as this does not endanger his intent. However, he may not leave decisions he himself is responsible for, to them.<sup>25</sup>

The changes to its predecessor seem to indicate that during the 12 years of training in the *Reichswehr* orders developed into detailed voluminous works restraining the subordinates' freedom of action. A reason for that may have been the practice to intensively train leaders for planning two levels above their actual position to allow for an expansion of the officer corps, once the limitations of the Treaty of Versailles could be reversed or ignored. The rule to report deviations from a given mission seems to reflect the growing capabilities of command and control, specifically the rise of radio communications – identified early by the *Reichswehr* as an enabling function for mobile warfare.

Overall, *Truppenführung* did not introduce fundamentally new aspects of *Auftragstaktik*. As shown above, its fundamental philosophy was emphasized and prominently depicted in the introductory section of the manual. As a specific aspect, the requirement for individual soldiers' independent action was stressed more intensively. In addition, the manual seems to address leadership developments that emerged during the intensive interwar training of the *Reichswehr*.

## Execution of Initiative

Although *Auftragstaktik* and initiative of the *Reichswehr* were a philosophy encompassing all levels of leadership, the executions of it were nevertheless subject to different circumstances or environmental factors. Initially, the division as the maneuver element of the corps constituted the boundary between the tactical and operational level, especially in the case of the tank divisions. They were meant to operate freely and accomplish tasks in support of the achievement of operational level objectives. Later, during World War II, the sparse forces available for extensive sections of the front often meant that this task fell to *Kampfgruppen* – *ad hoc* battlegroups of different available units.

### Tactical Level

The accounts of autonomous and aggressive execution of initiative of German soldiers and low-level leaders in World War II are legion. The Combat Studies Institute publication *16 Cases of Mission Command* alone describes three cases of exemplary leadership and initiative during the opening days of the campaign at the Western Front in 1940.<sup>26</sup> The dependence of the success of the campaign in the West in 1940 upon the success of low-level leaders seizing key terrain shows the fragility and risk of its operational plan. Junior officers and non-commissioned officers gained the respect of their opponents through aggressive and proactive execution of initiative in absence of orders or if the changing situation required deviations from the mission.<sup>27</sup> Dirk Oetting describes a case study which may be more illustrative than better-known stories of the campaigns against Belgium, Holland, and France: a mountain infantry staff sergeant and his platoon had been tasked to protect the flank of their battalion during the battles in the Caucasus Mountains in the Soviet Union in 1942. When the attack of the battalion stalled against strong Soviet defenses, the sergeant decided to deviate from his mission, bypass the enemy positions, and attack into the rear of the enemy. Splitting up his forces under the command of squad leaders and extending the few soldiers of the assault squad over extensive terrain, he relied upon the autonomous actions of his subordinates.<sup>28</sup>

Not only during offensive operations, but also in the defensive operations of the war, *Wehrmacht* low-level leadership prevailed. The containment of the Allied bridgehead after the Normandy landing in 1944 was substantially based upon small *Wehrmacht* detachments defending actively in the dispersed engagements of northern France's *bocage*.<sup>29</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Werner von Raesfeld commanded a *Kampfgruppe*

in the attempt to counter the Soviet winter offensive at the Eastern Front in 1941-1942. He asserts that the “homogeneous education of leaders of all ranks towards autonomy proved itself: Through creative action and the willingness to take responsibility within their given missions they contributed essentially to the reestablishment of a solid frontline.”<sup>30</sup> Lieutenant Colonel von Raesfeld himself, when confronted with superior Soviet forces decided to defensively break contact with the enemy. He states:

The battlegroup, which had fulfilled its mission to prevent an outflanking maneuver against the corps for some days, was now threatened with encirclement. Against the necessary withdrawal stood a Führerbefehl that prohibited any retrograde movement under the threat of punishment by court martial. The Russian breakthrough had made my mission obsolete. I therefore saw it, **under analogous development of my mission** [emphasis added], as my obligation to preserve the battlegroup by leading it back through the last gap. I thereby was aware that I was acting against the Führerbefehl, but **after fulfilling my [tactical] mission it was my human duty to prevent further loss of life** [emphasis added].<sup>31</sup>

This example depicts a tactical level commander facing the fundamental struggle between professional judgment and a given order.<sup>32</sup> As World War II progressed, commanders were more frequently confronted with missions that were no longer sustainable with forces and resources and bore the risk of being annihilated without substantial gains.

These examples provide only an overview of German World War II initiative at the tactical level. In his study *Fighting Power*, Martin van Creveld also points out how mission-type orders, freedom of action, mutual trust, and the willingness to assume responsibility contributed to a high combat effectiveness of the *Wehrmacht*.<sup>33</sup>

## Operational Level

The execution of initiative at the operational level on the Western Front is closely connected to pre-war discussions about tank doctrine and the operational concept itself. The *Sichelschnitt* concept developed by General Erich von Manstein was built upon surprise and a quick decisive thrust through the difficult terrain of the Ardennes and across the Meuse River. It was risky, and the traditionalists within the *Wehrmacht* leadership were highly skeptical about its success and doubted his underlying assumptions about the capabilities of the new tank weapon.<sup>34</sup>

General Heinz Guderian was a proponent of the massed use of tanks within combined fighting teams, the panzer divisions. For him, successful command during the operation was also a way of proving the theories about the employment of tanks he had proposed earlier.

The *Sichelschnitt* operation proceeded as planned. Attacking on 10 August 1940, Guderian's XIX Corps had passed through the Ardennes within three days and on the next day – relying on air support of historic dimensions – crossed the Meuse River, thus avoiding the need for extensive artillery support which would have cost one to two additional days due to the constraints of the road network in the Ardennes. On 14 August and while the bridgehead on the west bank of the river still was not secured, Guderian attacked further westwards without prior approval of his superior, General Paul Ludwig Ewald von Kleist.<sup>35</sup> On 15 August, von Kleist ordered a halt to the offensive to allow for the infantry to catch up. Guderian ignored this and on 17 August, when personally confronted with that order by von Kleist, asked to be removed from his position. Kleist accepted the insubordinate challenge, although the tactical situation forced him to change his mind shortly thereafter. Reinstalled in his position only hours later, Guderian was ordered to keep his command post at his current position and only employ strong reconnaissance elements. He disregarded this order again, commanding forward and connected to his command post by cable line so that his advance was kept hidden from German signal intelligence.<sup>36</sup> General Erwin Rommel, commanding 7th Panzer Division in General Hermann Hoth's corps, attacked on Guderian's right flank. Tasked to clear the eastern bank of the Meuse River, he decided on 13 August to cross the river upon his own initiative, which was successful. On the next day, Rommel's division was ordered to reinforce and secure the bridgehead that was still endangered by the possibility of French counterattacks.<sup>37</sup> Instead, Rommel attacked with the forces available during the next two days, opened a narrow path 120 kilometers deep into the French rear, disregarding the threat to his own flanks and rear, and lost communications with his superiors despite the fact that the division was spread out over a large distance. The thrust ended up 40 kilometers deep in the rear area of the French Ninth Army Corps, leading to its disruption.<sup>38</sup> Although this example certainly shows a maximum of independent action by a commander, Oetting points out that the success justified the Rommel's action. Furthermore, independent action and seizing opportunities were generally seen as an essential factor of success and therefore commonly encouraged or at least accepted within certain limits.<sup>39</sup>

The acceptance of the autonomous decisions of commanders was abruptly withdrawn and an inflexible system imposed when Hitler issued a *Führerbefehl* on 16 December 1941. Hitler's order forbade all retrograde movements, threatening disobedience with immediate court martial. The order constitutes the end point of a process of the disruption of the relationship between Hitler on one side and the *Wehrmacht* generals on the other. Hitler claimed that "[t]he army generals had totally lost their nerves. They were confronted for the first time with a war crisis while they had only won victories until then."<sup>40</sup> When analyzing the cases of commanders disobeying or criticizing this order, one must understand the context. Attempts to interpret the actions that will follow in this section as resistance against Hitler are false. The commanders named in the following cases strongly believed in obedience to the Nazi government as part of their profession even if they were not believers in the cause of the war. Nevertheless, they identified a responsibility towards their troops as part of their professional ethos, as we have already seen in the case of Lieutenant Colonel von Raesfeld.<sup>41</sup>

On 30 November 1941 there was a crisis on the Eastern Front. The First Panzer Army had seized the town of Rostov-on-Don, but a successful Soviet counterattack threatened the army's overextended lines, and it requested the permission to withdraw and consolidate. Hitler denied the request and ordered the army to hold its ground. Field Marshall Gerd von Rundstedt, commanding Army Group South, reported that he could not execute this order and requested a change of the order or his dismissal. Hitler removed him from his position but had to accept the withdrawal, which was inevitable.<sup>42</sup> On 17 December, one day after Hitler had issued his *Führerbefehl*, General Heinz Guderian – always highly praised and liked by Hitler – reported that he would not hold ground if his unit was threatened with destruction. When he received the *Führerbefehl* two days later, he reported to his higher command: "I am willing to receive these orders and put them in the file. I will not further distribute them [to subordinate units], even if in danger of facing a court martial."<sup>43</sup> Guderian travelled to Hitler to convince him to rescind the *Führerbefehl*. His army's war diary documents his view of Hitler's order:

The result of a rigid interpretation will unavoidably be cauldrons and with those the destruction of the force therein, which due to the lack of reserves cannot be relieved or received upon a breakthrough. The result can furthermore be the destruction of the army before the arrival of the announced reinforcements. . .

Fully aware of my responsibility I therefore want to point out the results of a rigid and verbatim execution of the *Führerbefehl* and request to be allowed to interpret it in the sense of the before mentioned [more flexible and terrain utilizing] manner.<sup>44</sup>

Guderian's request was denied, and he, too, was relieved from his position on 26 December 1941. Other generals followed their professional ethos and countered the *Führerbefehl*, which would have meant senseless death to thousands of soldiers: Otto-Wilhelm Förster (IV Corps); Lieutenant General Eccard Graf von Gablenz, (XXVII Corps); and Field Marshal Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb (Army Group North). They all requested dismissal because they could not take it upon themselves to order troops to hold ground without sufficient resources against overwhelming odds. Colonel-General Erich Hoepner, commander Fourth Panzer Army, was sacked and expelled from the *Wehrmacht* when he disobeyed the order and withdrew his forces.<sup>45</sup>

More tragic was the fate of Lieutenant General Hans Graf von Sponeck, tasked to secure the eastern portion of the Crimean Peninsula with the city Kerch to protect the rear of General von Manstein's Eleventh Army during the siege of Sevastopol. Two Soviet armies with strong naval support conducted amphibious landings on 26 December 1941 to relieve the Sevastopol garrison.<sup>46</sup> The two Red Army divisions and a naval infantry brigade were superior to the encircling German units, but the Germans were able to contain the initial landings and reduce some of the beachheads in the vicinity of Kerch. Nevertheless, Graf Sponeck requested on 26 December and again on 28 December to take his forces back to the isthmus of Parpatsch, a move that would allow for a more dense defensive line for his 46th Infantry Division.<sup>47</sup> Von Manstein denied both requests; after the war he stated that at the time he assumed that withdrawing from the peninsula would lead to a situation with which the army would be unable to cope.<sup>48</sup> On 29 December the Soviets conducted an additional landing with four divisions in Feodosia, in the south of the peninsula, which the defending German engineer battalion and its supporting units had no chance of containing. Graf Sponeck, realizing the danger of encirclement and aware of the threat to the rear of the whole Eleventh Army, decided to immediately break off the battle and withdraw to the isthmus to establish a new defensive line. He informed von Manstein, who ordered a halt to all rearward movements. However, this order was not received at Graf Sponeck's command post. He was relieved from his command by von Manstein and later sentenced to death by a military tribunal presided over by



Hermann Göring.<sup>49</sup> Hitler reduced the death penalty to a six-year prison sentence; Graf Sponeck was nevertheless put to death by order of Heinrich Himmler in the wake of the failed 20 July 1944 plot against Hitler. This occurred despite the fact that Graf Sponeck was still imprisoned and could not have taken part in the conspiracy.<sup>50</sup>

The assessment of Graf Sponeck's case is clear: the process and the harsh sentence combined with the fact that the pardon by Hitler was arranged prior to the court martial show that an example was to be made of Graf Sponeck to enforce the *Führerbefehl*.<sup>51</sup> Ironically, Graf Sponeck's command had not been issued with the order at the time he made his decision.<sup>52</sup> The fact that the Commander-in-Chief of the Luftwaffe, *Reichsmarschall* Göring, presided over a special senate of the *Reichskriegsgericht* – instead of an experienced Army general – underlines the political nature of the case.<sup>53</sup> In addition, Lieutenant General Walther von Seydlitz-Kurzbach, serving as a judge, was informed by Göring about the death penalty (and pardon) prior to the hearing but not told about the facts of the case.<sup>54</sup> The trial does seem to have been quick, but followed the legal formalities. Von Manstein claimed that he and the Eleventh Army commander did not know about the date of the trial, nor had they been asked to provide their assessment of Graf Sponeck's actions.<sup>55</sup> Another factor highlighting the political nature of the process may also have been that Graf Sponeck was one of the officers who spoke as a character witness for General Werner von Fritsch during his court martial in 1938.<sup>56</sup> The presiding judge had been Göring then also; he had harshly cut off the honorable but risky attempt by Graf Sponeck to unmask the political conspiracy against the senior Wehrmacht generals.<sup>57</sup>

The professional correctness of Graf Sponeck's decision to withdraw his forces is quite clear, too. Although von Manstein claimed that his order to hold was correct, his reasoning for it is contradictory. Not only did he give two different reasons to hold the peninsula, but also argued that the reinforcements, Romanian units (the different sources suggest a maximum of two brigades), would have been sufficient to counter the Soviet landing at Feodosia. On the other hand he claims not to have trusted the Romanians' combat effectiveness and spirit, a suspicion proven by subsequent events.<sup>58</sup> The detailed analysis of Eberhard Einbeck, who served as Graf Sponeck's Ia (G3 or operations officer) and was therefore directly involved in the decision-making, provides great detail in terms of personnel and equipment numbers, and the horrible Russian weather conditions that make the decision



from a professional standpoint of the author of this thesis absolutely reasonable.<sup>59</sup> The Romanian Prime Minister Ion Antonescu and General Alfred Jodl came to the same judgment.<sup>60</sup> The only point of criticism is the fact that the radio link between von Manstein's army and the units on the Kerch peninsula was broken during the hours after Graf Sponeck's report about his decision to withdraw. Von Manstein claims that this was caused deliberately to avoid receiving another order to hold the peninsula.<sup>61</sup> Einbeck provides several other reasonable causes: the telephone connection was disturbed when the switchboard in the Soviet beachhead in Feodosia was destroyed; the weather conditions made the radio links unreliable; and Graf Sponeck's command post did not have sufficient radio equipment to allow for an integration of the mobile command post that was used by Graf Sponeck while on the move over a distance of about 100 kilometers.<sup>62</sup> Von Manstein himself summarized the principle at stake: "The case of Graf Sponeck depicts the tragedy of the conflict between the obligation of obedience and the assessment of operational necessities inherent to being a higher commander. . . [The dismissal] did not happen because he had acted on his own authority. I have myself had to act often enough against operational directives even of Hitler, to concede to my subordinates the right to act on their own authority if required."<sup>63</sup>

For the question of the limits of obedience, the legal review of Graf Sponeck's defense lawyer is instructive. His written pleading started with some general comments about the limits of the obligation of obedience, based upon historical cases and the military law. It then states: "The defendant acted with no impunity, if he after thorough examination assessed that the order given no longer fitted to the situation and in its place substituted his own decision that fit into the operational intent of his superior known to him."<sup>64</sup> Based on this thesis three questions had to be examined:

1. What was the situation when the defendant received the denial of the withdrawal?
2. How had the situation changed when he decided to deviate from the order?
3. Could he assume that his own decision would fit into the general operational idea of his army commander?<sup>65</sup>

Von Manstein's statement and the scheme of Graf Sponeck's defense lawyer probably provide the best summary of the dilemma senior commanders in the *Wehrmacht* faced during the rest of World War II. The

depicted examples, however, have to be quantified; for each of the examples mentioned above there were also senior commanders who avoided conflict with Hitler, in order not to endanger their career, out of timidity, or because they were believers in Nazi ideology. The most prominent example may be Field Marshal Friedrich Paulus, who suffered with the whole Sixth Army in the cauldron of Stalingrad instead of disobeying Hitler's order and attempting to break out.

## Conclusion

*Auftragstaktik* as a proven concept was carried from the end of World War I through the Interwar Period well into World War II. The combination of *Auftragstaktik* and the concept of breakthrough into deep operations that had prevailed during the 1918 offenses and the integration of the emerging capabilities of modern weapons into it were the main focus of doctrinal change and training efforts in the *Reichswehr*. The developments in terms of the understanding of initiative were less groundbreaking – the need for autonomous action was explicitly extended down to the single soldier. The everlasting risk of overly independent leaders remains a topic reflected with changing effort within the two pieces of capstone doctrine of this period. The 1933 *Truppenführung* names two topics of contemporary relevance today, missions that encompass so many tasks that they do not provide focus and overly detailed orders that restrain the subordinate's level of leeway.

The execution of initiative consists of three major topics: at the lower tactical level junior leaders down to squad and fire team level earned the high respect of their Allied counterparts through adaptive, aggressive, and autonomous actions, which seized opportunities and contributed to the high combat effectiveness Martin van Creveld describes in his comparative study.

At the operational level, the agility of German offensive operations, against which neither of the Allies had means, initially led to great successes of the *Wehrmacht*. The capabilities of the armored divisions – in fact combined fighting teams – not countered by equivalent units on the French, British, and Soviet side allowed for deep penetrations and encirclements that were successful in decisively defeating the Allies' large infantry formations. The ability to create a clear main effort and thus massive superiority enabled the deliberate selection of the place of a breakthrough, compared to the 1918 offensives where the tactical success could not be linked to operational level objectives. The

examples depict that the categories one and two of initiative were deeply ingrained into the soldier's and leader's understanding of initiative.

When the war on the Eastern Front could not be won in a single stroke in 1941, it became more and more clear that German resources were not sufficient for the extended land mass and the Soviet ability to mobilize its population. Commanders at the operational level and tactical leaders operating outside of a contiguous front subsequently faced missions that were overambitious for the forces and resources available. Hitler's *Führerbefehl*, restricting the withdrawal of forces in opposition to long-standing doctrine and the tradition of *Auftragstaktik*, set up a conflict between obeying orders and losing soldiers and units without gains. The manual *Truppenführung* states the following about the issue of breaking contact:

An engagement can be broken off after its purpose has been achieved; when the circumstances require the use of units at another position where their redeployment seems more advantageous; when continuing the engagement may not lead to success; or when defeat can be avoided only by breaking contact.

The breaking of contact can be deliberate or forced, and executed on the decision of either the immediate commander or the next higher commander. Subordinate units should be informed of the reasons for a deliberate break in contact.<sup>66</sup>

The actions of the commanders breaking contact against Hitler's order therefore fell into accordance with doctrine and the professional understanding of the category three initiative. Comparing the citation from the manual and the legal scheme Lieutenant General Graf Sponeck's defense lawyer used on one hand, and the statement of Lieutenant Colonel von Raesfeld explaining his motive on the other, we see that the category three initiative consisted of two elements.<sup>67</sup> First, the professional doctrinal understanding to make independent decisions based upon the development of the situation, and second the ethical element of the profession to preserve subordinate soldiers' lives if possible.

## Notes

1. Nicholas A. Murray, "Capturing Eben-Emael: The Key to the Low Countries," in *16 Cases of Mission Command*, ed. Donald P. Wright (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013), 147.
2. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, 367-368.
3. James S. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg, Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), 29.
4. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg, Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform*, 25-26.
5. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg, Hans von Seeckt and German Military Reform*, 26-28.
6. Hans von Seeckt to Truppenamt et al., December 1, 1919, BA/MA, RH 2/2275, quoted in Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 37.
7. German Truppenamt, D. V. Pl. Nr. 487., *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen (F. u. G.)* (Charlottenburg, Germany: Verlag Offene Worte, 1921). James Corum in *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 37, translates the title as Leadership and Battle with Combined Arms, the content however reflects leadership to a lesser degree than the mission command warfighting function and philosophy.
8. Corum, *The Roots of Blitzkrieg*, 39.
9. Bruce Condell and David T. Zabecki, ed., *On the German Art of War, Truppenführung* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001), 3.
10. For a comprehensive discussion of these topics see Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millet, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
11. German Truppenamt, *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*, III-IV.
12. Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 10.
13. German Truppenamt, *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*, 3-4.
14. German Truppenamt, *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*, 7.
15. See page 15 of this thesis.
16. German Truppenamt, *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*, 9.
17. Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 3. Like its predecessor, the manual is not constrained to the capabilities available at the time of its publication but assumes an army unrestrained by resources and international treaties. German Truppenamt, H. Dv. 300/1, *Truppenführung* (T.F.), E.G. Mittler & Sohn, Berlin, Germany, 1933: II.
18. Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 3.
19. German Truppenamt, *Truppenführung*, 1-5.
20. German Truppenamt, *Truppenführung*, 2-3.
21. German Truppenamt, *Truppenführung*, 3.
22. See page 19 for the 1906 drill regulations and page 56-57 for the 1921 *Führung und Gefecht der verbundenen Waffen*.
23. Preußisches Kriegsministerium, *Exerzier-Reglement für die Infanterie*, 91.
24. German Truppenamt, *Truppenführung*, 5.
25. German Truppenamt, *Truppenführung*, 10-11.
26. Donald P. Wright, ed., *16 Cases of Mission Command* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2013).
27. Dirk W. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik: Geschichte und Gegenwart einer Führungskonzeption* (Frankfurt am Main/ Bonn, Germany: Verlag, 1993), 205-206.

28. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik: Geschichte und Gegenwart einer Führungskonzeption*, 209.
29. Examples for small unit battles against superior allied forces can be found in Max Hastings, *Overlord, D-Day and the Battle for Normandy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 170-172, 179-181, 183-185.
30. Werner von Raesfeld, "Führung durch Auftrag oder durch bindenden Befehl," in *Wehrkunde*, 1960, Heft 4: 167, quoted in Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 210.
31. Raesfeld, "Führung durch Auftrag oder durch bindenden Befehl," quoted in Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 210-211.
32. See page 52 of this thesis.
33. Martin van Creveld, *Fighting Power: German Military Performance, 1914-1945* (study submitted to the Department of Defense, Washington, DC, 1980), 189-199.
34. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 194-195.
35. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 197-198.
36. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 199-200.
37. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 201.
38. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 202-203.
39. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 203-204.
40. Josef Goebbels, *Tagebuch* (03/31/45), Part II, Vol. 15: 648-649, quoted in Johannes Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer, Die Deutschen Oberbefehlshaber im Krieg gegen die Sowjetunion*, 1941/42 (Munich, Germany: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2007), 332.
41. See page 50 of this thesis.
42. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 213.
43. Heinz Guderian, "War Diary Army Group Center, H.Gr.Kdo.Mitte, KTB Ia, 19.12.1941," quoted in Hürter, *Hitlers Heerführer*, 329.
44. Heinz Guderian, "War Diary 2nd Panzer Army," quoted in Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 214.
45. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 215.
46. David M. Glantz and Jonathan M. House, *When Titans Clashed, How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 94.
47. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 230.
48. Erich von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege* (Bonn, Germany, Athenäum Verlag, 1955), 241; Eberhard Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck, Ein Beitrag zum Thema Hitler und seine Generale* (Bremen, Germany: Carl Schünemann Verlag, 1970), 21. Mungo Melvin claims that the reasoning for von Manstein's decision was that the Kertsch peninsula, once evacuated, would have to be taken back by a major offensive. Mungo Melvin, *Manstein, Hitler's Greatest General* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2010), 250.
49. Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 241; Melvin, *Manstein*, 249-251; Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 230-231.
50. Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 245; Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 232.
51. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 232; Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 34, 53-57.
52. Oetting, *Auftragstaktik*, 233.
53. Norbert Haase, "Aus der Praxis des Reichskriegsgerichts, Neue Dokumente zur Militärgerichtsbarkeit im Zweiten Weltkrieg," in *Vierteljahreshefte zur Zeitgeschichte*, ed. Karl Dietrich Bracher, Hans Peter Schwarz, 39. Jahrgang, 1991, 3. Heft/Juli: 285.
54. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 39.

55. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 40-45; von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 244.

56. Harold C. Deutsch, *Hitler and his Generals, The Hidden Crisis, January-June 1938* (Ann Arbor, MI: Edwards Brothers, 1974), 335; Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 8-9. General Fritsch had during the so called Blomberg-Fritsch affair been accused of homosexual behavior, which in those days was against German military law, and forced to retire from his position as Commander-in-Chief of the Army as part of a political plot to increase the influence of the Nazi party over the Wehrmacht.

57. Deutsch, *Hitler and his Generals*, 346-347.

58. Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 241-242. The Romanian forces most likely consisted of a cavalry brigade with one motorized regiment and a mountain brigade. As soon as the Red Army attacked with tanks out of the beachhead, the Romanian units panicked. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 30.

59. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 22-25.

60. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 35-36.

61. Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 245.

62. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 27-29.

63. Von Manstein, *Verlorene Siege*, 244. Von Manstein claims that Graf Sponeck had a psychological condition that would at that time no longer enable him to command under the stress of the difficult situation the troops faced on the Eastern Front in the winter of 1941-1942. Einbeck on page 26 denies that Graf Sponeck had lost his nerve. Manstein had planned to transfer him to a position similar to his at an army corps in a calmer section of the front. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 33. To von Manstein's credit it also has to be said that he tried to secure a pardon for Graf Sponeck after the court martial which von Manstein had thought would prove that Graf Sponeck had acted appropriately. He also persuaded the personnel office of the army to pay Graf Sponeck's family the full pension according to his rank. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 60. His account in his book however seems to be primarily driven by the aim to explain his decisions and actions to a post-World War II audience.

64. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 42.

65. Einbeck, *Das Exempel Graf Sponeck*, 42.

66. Condell and Zabecki, *On the German Art of War*, 137.

67. See pages 38 and 43 of this thesis.

## Chapter 5

### The Ethical Component of Initiative From Responsibility for the Preservation of Units to *Innere Führung*

We have to understand that we cannot allow for technocracy in our armed forces, but that we must make it our first priority to reflect on the ethical foundations of our actions.

This means especially that we have to translate the consequences of such thoughts into the every-day problems for the individual soldier, if *Innere Führung*<sup>1</sup> is to be an understandable concept for the soldier.<sup>2</sup>

– from *Innere Führung, A High Demand for the Practice*, by General Wolfgang Schneiderhan,  
14th Inspector General of the *Bundeswehr*

The decision for German *Wiederbewaffnung* (re-armament) as a result of the Cold War in Europe and the hot war in Korea created a unique challenge for the planners of a new German army. On one hand, the need for rapid re-creation of a German military required the utilization of former *Wehrmacht* personnel; on the other, the army of the new democracy had to take great pains to ensure such recalled personnel had no association with Nazi ideology. The fact that the *Reichswehr* had failed to oppose Hitler's subversion of the republican constitution under Weimar meant that the new force would not perpetuate the old custom, whereby soldiers were banned from political participation through membership in parties or exercising the right to vote. Instead, members of the Adenauer government stipulated that the future soldier would not just retain his citizen rights but be expected to exercise them. Soldiers (both short-term conscript and long-service professional) would be educated to understand their roles as active defenders of democracy against external and internal foes.<sup>3</sup> This led naturally to another evolution of the German command philosophy. This iteration aimed not at countering technological or tactical developments but at expanding the freedom of soldiers and leaders at all levels to act according to the dictates of their consciences. This stage of development can only be fully understood against the background of the involvement of the *Wehrmacht* in war crimes during World War II, especially on the Eastern Front. The lost war of 1939-1945 had a fundamentally different impact upon the German population than, for example, the defeat by Napoleon in 1806 or the loss of World War I. The complicity of ordinary



Germans with crimes against humanity under the Nazi regime made adherence to ethical principles an imperative objective of all actions of the Federal Republic of Germany. Nevertheless, in 1950, just five years after the capitulation, when initial planning for a German contribution to the defense of Western Europe started, the majority of the population rejected any such action. Connections to the *Kaiserheer*, *Reichswehr*, and *Wehrmacht* were, in most respects, neither desirable nor practical.

*Auftragstaktik* is a value-neutral concept. In the newly-resurrected Federal Army, doctrine became subordinated to the overarching philosophy of *Innere Führung*. *Bundeswehr* Joint Service Regulation ZDv 10/1, *Innere Führung* establishes its primacy over all other concepts by stating:

**Respecting and protecting human dignity are an obligation of the German state and thus the *Bundeswehr*** [emphasis in the original]. This obligation is at once the ethical justification for and a limitation of military service. Values based on human dignity are also the foundation for the principles of *Innere Führung* and thus for legal norms within the *Bundeswehr* as well as the structure of its internal order.<sup>4</sup>

It further describes the underlying principles and elements of the philosophy:

**Through *Innere Führung*, the values and norms of the Basic Law are perpetuated within the *Bundeswehr*** [emphasis in the original]. It embodies the principles of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law in the armed forces. Its guiding principle is the “citizen in uniform.”

*Innere Führung* thus ensures a **maximum of military effectiveness** and guarantees a **maximum of freedom and rights for soldiers** [emphasis in the original] in the framework of our free democratic basic order.

The principles of *Innere Führung* are based on ethical, legal, political, and social **foundations** and meet military **demands** [emphasis in the original]. These foundations and demands shape the concept of *Innere Führung* and its areas of application.<sup>5</sup>

In this system, the application of the principle of *Auftragstaktik* by leaders and individual soldiers is one of eight criteria for *Innere Führung*, constituting a leadership style that best conforms with the principle of



the “citizen in uniform.”<sup>6</sup> The manual underlines the positive effects of shared responsibility and the active participation of subordinates on motivation, job satisfaction and operational readiness.<sup>7</sup> Discipline is to be achieved out of insight instead of external pressure.<sup>8</sup>

The basic concept of *Auftragstaktik*, to provide an understanding of the reasoning for a mission through conveying the purpose and the overall scheme, expands under *Innere Führung* by the requirement to also provide subordinates with the necessity of a mission, especially under stress.<sup>9</sup> With this, soldiers “will be able and prepared to act out of conviction in accordance with the mission, and will take into consideration wider objectives.”<sup>10</sup> The change of warfare in Europe in the atomic and then nuclear ages necessitated increased independence of action by soldiers at all levels. Disrupted command structures, widespread physical devastation, and civilian casualties caused by the use of nuclear weapons against populated areas – the likely reality in nuclear war – would fundamentally affect the German soldier’s motives to fight. The broadened principles of *Auftragstaktik* would provide the soldier not only with the capability to autonomously fight in this environment but also the motivation.<sup>11</sup>

Overall, the establishment of *Innere Führung* constituted a necessary precondition for the integration of German armed forces into the Western European defense structure so soon after the war. By grafting *Innere Führung* onto *Auftragstaktik*, an established command philosophy, creators of the *Bundeswehr* provided an ethical foundation for the actions of soldiers and leaders previously lacking in German military doctrine. *Innere Führung* also amplified the positive effects of *Auftragstaktik* as a leadership and management method, providing commitment and motivation for soldiers led by means of a surprisingly modern command philosophy.

## Conclusion

The adaptation of German command philosophy conducted prior to the foundation of the *Bundeswehr* differs from those that happened in the periods described in the earlier chapters of the work. The *Bundeswehr* built upon the established understanding of *Auftragstaktik* and the three categories of initiative that had been established in the one and a half centuries since the battles of Jena and Auerstädt. Therefore the adaptation addressed the three different qualities added to the philosophy instead of fundamentally altering the basic concept.

Most prominently, *Innere Führung* officially established the ethical dimension of actions of German soldiers and leaders representing the post-World War II democratic German state. Breaking with the *Wehrmacht* as an institution, the *Bundeswehr* honored only those officers of the *Wehrmacht* who had acted upon ethical principles and not those who only won tactical engagements. This shift was made obvious when the *Bundeswehr Luftwaffe* stated on its webpage:

Count Sponeck in life was always trying to ingrain into his soldiers spirit and discipline. He subordinated the *Diktat* of unconditional obedience to his conscience and his responsibility towards his soldiers. For this he gave his life. To honor him a memorial stone has been set up in the Sponeck Barracks in Gernersheim . . . It includes a quotation of Field Marshal Moltke that appropriately characterizes Sponeck's actions: "Obedience is a principle. But the man stands above the principle."<sup>12</sup>

By these actions and by means of many others both great and small did the leaders of the new German defense forces live up to the example shown by all too few commanders during World War II, and thus did ethical leadership become an official principle of the *Bundeswehr*.

*Auftragstaktik* – as the fundamental leadership style applied in the daily work within the *Bundeswehr* – is the second quality added. It provides a modern way of interaction between superiors and subordinates thus creating commitment and active participation throughout the ranks. It is therefore a motivational factor contributing to the role of the *Bundeswehr* as a competitive employer.

Last but not least, the realities of life in a potential frontline state in a nuclear war dictated the nature and role of *Innere Führung*. It ably complements the established principle of giving an explanation for a mission to subordinates in order to provide a motive to fight for freedom and democracy despite the almost certain devastation in such a war.

## Notes

1. The term *Innere Führung* cannot properly be translated into English. The literal translation would be “internal direction,” but the concept covers the whole spectrum of leadership development and civic education in addition to providing an individual ethical guidance.

2. Wolfgang Schneiderhan, Generalinspekteur (senior uniformed officer) of the German Armed Forces, in a speech on the occasion of a scientific conference at the Führungsakademie der Bundeswehr with the topic “Innere Führung: A High Demand for the Practice,” June 20, 2003, in *Gesellschaft, Militär, Krieg und Frieden im Denken von Wolf Graf von Baudissin* ed. Martin Kutz (Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 2004), 180.

3. Karl Diefenbach, “Staatsbürger in Uniform, Ausgangspunkt und Ziel der Inneren Führung,” in *Reader Sicherheitspolitik, Die Bundeswehr vor neuen Herausforderungen*, ed. Bundesministerium der Verteidigung, FüS I 4, Dieter Buchholtz (Bonn, Germany: 1998), 20.

4. German Federal Minister of Defense, *Joint Service Regulation ZDv 10/1, Innere Führung* (Leadership Development and Civic Education) (Bonn, Germany: 2008), para. 305.

5. German Federal Minister of Defense, *Joint Service Regulation ZDv 10/1, Innere Führung*, para 301-303.

6. German Federal Minister of Defense, *Joint Service Regulation ZDv 10/1, Innere Führung*, para 316, 613.

7. German Federal Minister of Defense, *Joint Service Regulation ZDv 10/1, Innere Führung*, para 612.

8. Helmut R. Hammerich, “Kerniger Kommiss oder Weiche Welle? Baudissin und die kriegsnahe Ausbildung in der Bundeswehr,” in *Wolf Graf von Baudissin, 1907-1993, Modernisierer zwischen totalitärer Herrschaft und freiheitlicher Ordnung*, ed. Rudolf J. Schlaffer and Wolfgang Schmidt (Munich, Germany: Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2007), 130.

9. Hammerich, “Kerniger Kommiss oder Weiche Welle?” paragraph 614.

10. Hammerich, “Kerniger Kommiss oder Weiche Welle?” paragraph 614.

11. Hammerich, “Kerniger Kommiss oder Weiche Welle?” 129-130.

12. Luftwaffe web page, quoted in Loretana de Libero, “Tradition und Traditionsverständnis der Deutschen Luftwaffe,” in *Tradition und Traditionsverständnis der Deutschen Luftwaffe, Geschichte, Gegenwart, Perspektiven*, ed. Heiner Möllers (Potsdam, Germany: Militärgeschichtliches Forschungsamt, 2012), 17.



## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The aim of this work was to identify factors that historically have influenced or determined the acceptable extent of initiative during the application of *Auftragstaktik* in the Prussian and German armies over the last two centuries. I believe that parameters must be in place before the fact to specify the accepted degree of initiative rather than afterwards. Identifying these factors and parameters should serve discussions about the future utility of *Auftragstaktik* and Mission Command, and specifically, *Auftragstaktik* used as the basis for Mission Command.

#### Parameters for the Limits of Initiative

The problem set of knowing before the fact if a decision upon one's own authority would be seen as appropriate execution of initiative or disruptive disobedience did not emerge until the concept of *Auftragstaktik* had been fully established by the end of Moltke's age. During the 19th century in the Prussian and German Armies, exercise of initiative by operational level commanders was seen as an objective with innate value, regardless of the outcome of an action. As long as a commander showed proactive leadership and *élan*, his actions were justified. A supporting factor for this judgment, which can be found most clearly in the editions of Moltke's writings published by the General Staff at the turn of the 20th Century, was the fact that commanders who aggressively went after the enemy could trust their neighboring units would join them and hence ensure success. The contrast of reluctant French commanders unwilling to act independently in 1870 justified this Prussian virtue.

The selected historical examples of the later periods highlight the difficulty of identifying universal parameters. Before the 1950s the only enduring truth for a commander acting independently was that success justifies all measures. When contrasting the execution of the Schlieffen Plan with Guderian's and Rommel's successes in 1940, one cannot fail to ask oneself how today's judgment would look had a French counterattack cut off the dangerously exposed supply lines of those two German commanders. For tactical level initiative of categories one and two – restrained to independently accomplish the mission or support the higher commander's intent respectively – the problem of identifying parameters does not seem to be difficult. It remains unknown however, how many cases of subordinates misjudging the situation or not

understanding the higher commander's intent exist for each known account of exemplary initiative.

The cases of the German generals dismissed from their positions and in some cases court-martialed for not obeying the 1941 *Führerbefehl* demonstrate the end result of a complete breakdown of trust between political leadership and the military. Although unsuccessful, the defense used by Graf Sponeck's legal team documents the professional understanding of the limits of initiative at that time.

### **Factors Influencing the Extent of Initiative**

Several factors were instrumental in the development of *Auftragstaktik*. It began with societal factors leading to mass armies of unprecedented size requiring decentralized execution by higher commanders who had to march separated and then concentrate in time for the battle. In parallel, the increased accuracy and firepower of both infantry and artillery weapons – a technological factor carrying through to World War I – led to the introduction of increasingly dispersed tactical formations on the battlefield. This encouraged low-level tactical initiative due to the need to fire weapons at one's own rhythm and to utilize the terrain independently. The necessary autonomy at the level of squads and fire teams meant a certain degree of independence was unavoidable – at least in situations where communications technology was relatively inefficient. An interesting interdependence developed between the cultural attraction of the German Army towards initiative and the capability of operational level maneuver. Due to the cultural disposition of the German Army, tactics based upon initiative were selected as the answer to the stalemate at the World War I Western Front. This led to the reemergence of the capability of operational level maneuver in 1918, which then reinforced the predisposition towards initiative, allowing for the exploitation of opportunities at an unprecedented level, proving the value of both concepts. The professional, ethical element underpinning initiative was temporarily suppressed during World War II but allowed for the re-founding of German armed forces under the auspices of a democratic and ethical foundation during the Cold War.

### **A Holistic Approach to *Auftragstaktik***

When writing a historical paper with the aspiration to not only describe the past but contribute to current discussions, one must ask what those contributions should be. This paper shows that *Auftragstaktik* in the Prussian and German armies resulted from a long developmental process and that it consists of several facets. It is not within the scope of

this paper to elaborate on the challenges to the application of *Auftragstaktik* in armies underpinned by other command philosophies. A good source for the interested reader is the work of the Israeli scholar Shamir Eitan, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British and Israeli Armies*. There are, however, some recommendations from a German perspective.

*Auftragstaktik* is the result of both random and deliberate developments during the last two centuries of German history. In its current form it is an all-encompassing command philosophy that informs critical aspects of service in the *Bundeswehr*. The adherence to this principle guarantees that individual soldiers and leaders at every level are trained and educated in the spirit and at the required level of understanding to allow for mutual trust in the abilities of fellow soldiers. It also enables those soldiers to search for, identify, and exploit opportunities to gain and maintain the initiative. The establishment of the General Staff as an instrument to create the professional foundation for *Auftragstaktik* at the operational level serves as an example for this, as well as the training and education emphasized during the Interwar Period. In both cases the prerequisites for successful execution of initiative were laid during peacetime.

*Auftragstaktik* is grounded upon an ethical foundation of positive allowances and expectations instead of regulations that restrict behavior to severe professional norms. This implies *a priori* trust in the “citizen in uniform” or candidate for officer or non-commissioned officer positions. Jörg Muth’s *Command Culture, Officer Education in the US Army and the German Armed Forces, 1901-1940, and the Consequences for World War II* describes the circumstances of this kind of education very well. The Prussian practice of treating officer cadets as mature and responsible beings engendered in them the self-confidence required for them to act autonomously upon firm ethical judgment.

The paper has also shown that the development of *Auftragstaktik* was determined by the realities the Prussian and German armies faced. It remains therefore necessary to keep sight not only of the different aspects of *Auftragstaktik* but also of the environment, the socio-political developments within and around an army and the doctrinal and technological developments on the battlefield. Rommel’s unplanned deep thrust in May 1940, for example, is hard to imagine happening in 2015 given the current requirements to provide 48 hours advance synchronization of the airspace.

Therefore, although having come into being in a piecemeal fashion, *Auftragstaktik* is a philosophy that is directly applicable only in the environment of the German Army. Its roots lie in a Clausewitzian understanding of warfare and it is nested in a culture of mutual trust and tolerance for mistakes. It requires proficient leaders with a strong ethical compass who command through a decision-making process that emphasizes understanding of the problem rather than the perfection of a solution accounting for all eventualities. While this philosophy, if holistically applied, creates adaptive leaders and thus the flexibility in command and cognitive skills Meir Finkel describes as one requirement for the ability to counter surprise, the question of whether selective implementation in absence of the described prerequisites can be successful remains at least debatable.

### **The Future of *Auftragstaktik***

Is *Auftragstaktik* compatible with integrated command and control systems that provide the opportunity to link the individual soldier or tank crew to the theater commander? Does it have a future where a live video feed of the helmet-mounted camera and the capabilities of surveillance systems provide the illusion of shared situational awareness across all echelons? The last decade of Coalition operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that allowed commanders to focus on those few subordinate elements in contact with the enemy indicates that centralized control can work well. The increased joint integration at lower levels increases the benefits of preplanned operations that can be supported intensively by joint Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) and fires.

When they next face a near-peer adversary, Western armies could be forced to restrict the use of their command and control systems to avoid detection. Cyber warfare could disrupt friendly networks, forcing the armed forces to use less sophisticated systems. On the other hand, it is debatable whether network-enabled centralized command would work once the majority of subordinate units are engaged with the enemy. In such a scenario the best commander and the best staff might be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information. How sophisticated is the situational awareness provided by a video stream?

Other aspects of *Auftragstaktik* demand attention when considering its future role. How can armed forces develop leaders instead of managers or administrators if they never allow junior leaders to act with autonomy? How can they compete with other employers if service in



the armed forces requires new officers to curb their initiative, repress independent thought, and does not require the use of the own intellectual capabilities? *Auftragstaktik* as an overarching command philosophy which provides the opportunity to develop a military that has sustainable access to adequate human resources and is capable of coping



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